

THE WAR YEARS



Beating The System

During elementary training at St. Catherines I learned to solo a single engine Tiger Moth and I thought it would be neat to fly over our house in Stratford. My mother was informed by phone about this caper. I located the Stratford Hospital and flew along Cambria Street where our house was located. I went down to about 500 feet and did steep turns. Mrs. Lawson, a neighbour, witnessed this low flying plane, which was against relations, and said she was going to report it. My mother told her she'd better not - that it was her son Bill!

Upon graduating at Service Training School in Brantford I finally got my wings and a commission as a pilot officer. As I was older and more mature (having the right stuff), I was put down on the instructors list, which meant I would be staying in Canada.

At the Wings Parade you had to march up and salute the commanding officer who pinned on your wings. We had all been celebrating the night before, and when he asked me what my plans were, I said, "To come to grips with the enemy, Sir". Brilliant!

Being an instructor was not what I had in mind. The flight commander in charge of overseas postings had asked me to do a crest for the door of his office. When I presented it to him, he inquired "How much?" I said "Nothing Sir, but would it be possible to transfer my name to the overseas postings list? No problem, he replied, and that's how I got to go to England. The other guys never knew how Pop had worked it!



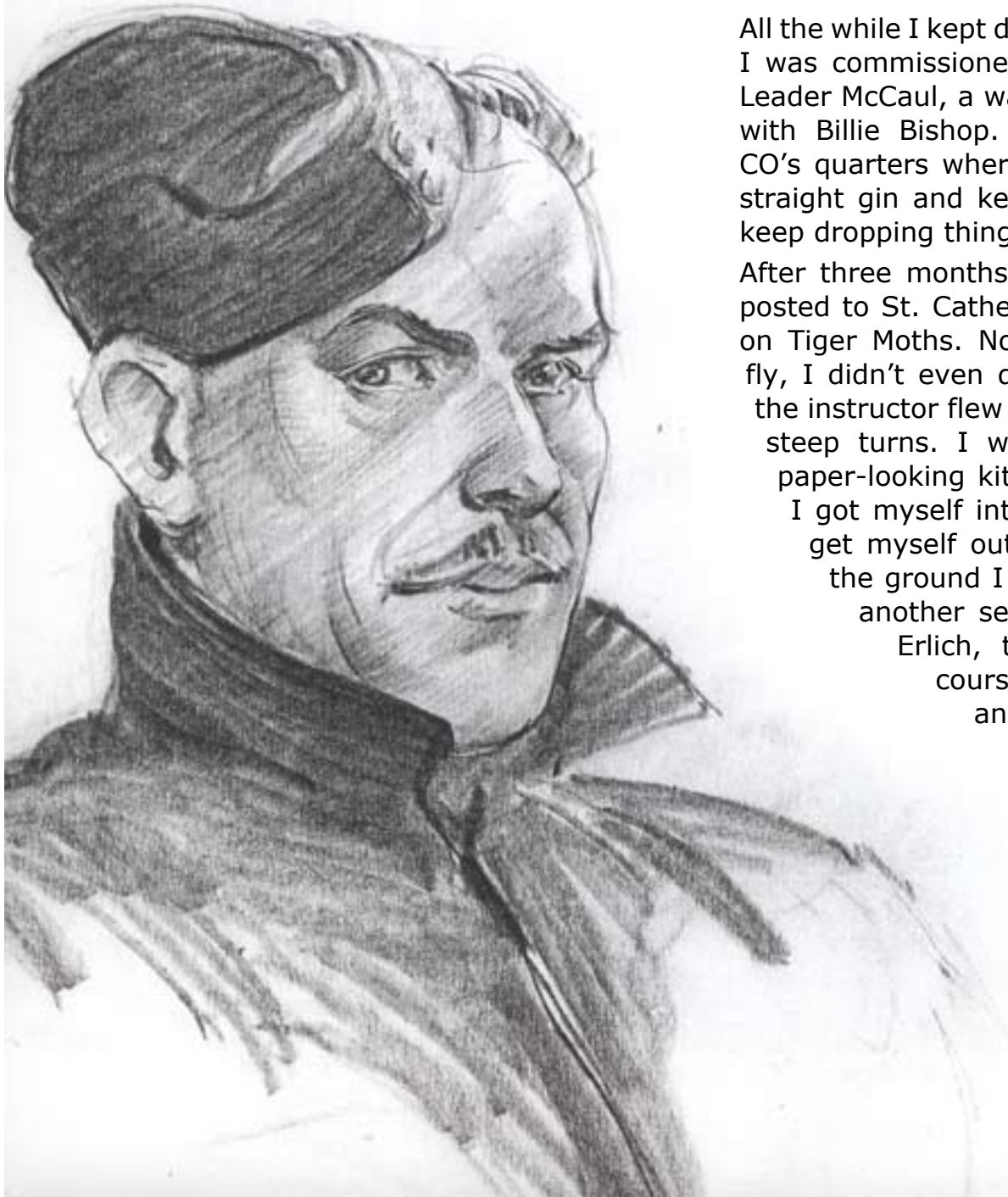
There were countless numbers of low flying and other irregularities during service training - flying under bridges, telephone and hydro wires. One pilot took a trip across the border and landed in a farmer's field. He spent jail time for his weekend. On one occasion, a twin engine Anson with a student pilot and crew was descending to land just ahead of me. Suddenly, it crashed. I had to do circuits until the mess was removed. I learned to pay attention.

Flight School



We were at Manning Depot about seven months before some of us were posted to No. 1 Initial Training School in the old Hunt Club at Avenue Road and Eglington. This was like a commando course, very heavy on getting into shape, studying ground school math, aero-engines and meteorology. The average age of the aircrew was nineteen. The young kids called me "Pop." I was all of twenty-five, as was Art Stollery, a former Argo football player.

Most of us were from Toronto and we were mostly buddies. Murray Sunshine and I hit it off. He was a big guy who had played football and was a light heavyweight boxer. He was Jewish - there were more Jewish volunteers per capita in the armed services than any other minority. As part of our commando fitness course the physical instructor, Bert Lair, who had been the welterweight champion, organized a boxing tournament. I had boxed in Stratford in a few tournaments so I was entered in a bout against another younger boxer in the same weight division. We called him "The Kid." He was sort of a smart-ass with a big mouth-not too popular with the other guys. But he had a lot more boxing experience than I did and I could tell he was pretty good. Not wanting to have him show me up, Sunshine and I concocted a plot to intimidate him. We arranged to spar together in the ring when The Kid was watching. Murray agreed to take it easy. I landed a punch on his jaw and he went down like a felled tree. The Kid thought I had knocked him out! The next day before the fight he went on sick parade so I won by default. The other guys got a big kick out of it and The Kid was more subdued after that. There's more than one way to win a fight.



All the while I kept drawing and painting. While there I was commissioned to do a portrait of Squadron Leader McCaul, a war ace from WWI who had flown with Billie Bishop. I arranged a platform in the CO's quarters where McCaul sat for me. He drank straight gin and kept falling asleep so I'd have to keep dropping things to wake him up.

After three months at Initial Training School I was posted to St. Catherine's Elementary Flying School on Tiger Moths. Now, I had no burning desire to fly, I didn't even drive a car. On my first trip up the instructor flew over Niagara Falls and did some steep turns. I wondered what kept those frail paper-looking kites together and wondered how I got myself into this mess, or worse, how I'd get myself out! When I got my feet back on the ground I was determined to re-enlist in another service until I heard that Murray Erlich, the only married man on the course, had asked to be re-enlisted and the reason that went on his record was LMF — lack of moral fibre. On hearing this I didn't have the guts to admit I was scared. Like everything else, once you get into it the fear leaves. By the end of the war I had logged 1000 flying hours.

Overseas

On the way to Halifax I had plenty of time to think about the future with a few inhibitions about not returning. There were more casualties in the airforce than in any other service. We had to go to New York to board the Queen Elizabeth with 5000 other aircrew. I was laden down like a pack horse with my dunnage bag, paintbox, canvases and sketchbooks. My paintbox fell off the gangplank into the ocean and some of the guys fished it out with a boat hook for me. We zigzagged across the Atlantic to avoid being detected by submarines. One kid panicked during a fire drill and upon our arrival in England he was immediately shipped home. We were approaching Ireland in the fog, and when it suddenly lifted there were the beautiful green emerald hills before us. I was enthralled at the poetic wonder of the sight when two young Canadians at the next porthole piped up, "Look at them there hills - bald as a baby's arse!"

It was February when we arrived in England and we were stationed in hotels in Bournemouth on the south coast. The Canadians weren't accustomed to the damp, cold, unheated rooms and burned all the drawers out of the dressers in the fireplaces to keep warm. One night I came home to find they had put my paintbox on the fireplace and the corner was already smoldering. I was furious and would have killed the kid who did it. No one confessed. I carried the box for years bearing the scars of war.

While there I noticed a group of young women, both airforce and civilian, gathered each afternoon to wave at the squadrons of five Spitfires taking off across the English Channel to bomb enemy airfields. Often only three or four would return. It was my first confrontation with the realities of war.



Artist at war

After the period of the “phony war” between 1939 and 1942 the British and French imperialist democracies were trying to swing the war against the Soviet Union to stop the spread of socialism in Europe. The British, under Churchill, reacted to Hitler’s attack on England by declaring a united front against Germany. It was then that I decided to join the airforce. I wanted to get into the Artists’ Corp but the recruiting officer said that one hadn’t been officially formed yet. He recommended that I go into Aircrew and remuster when the Artists’ Corp was organized. Little did I know that when they spend a quarter of a million dollars training a pilot there isn’t much chance of being remustered to an Artists’ Corp.



Being part of the airforce was a humbling experience. As an enlisted volunteer I was first stationed at Manning Depot in Toronto in what used to be the cattle arena. Some 7000 airmen were housed there. It was formerly used by the Canadian National Exhibition to house all the livestock during the annual show. The air was still permeated with the smell of disinfectant combined with manure. It was furnished with two-tiered iron bunks and wooden tables. Beginning at the lowest rank I soon learned that the social hierarchy had the democracy of a roller towel. There was plenty of company to share one's complaints with, which became a way of life right from the start.

During our time there an escaped Nazi prisoner hid out in our midst camouflaged in an airforce uniform. What safer place could there be to hide? He bunked about six rows from me. One morning during wash up time we noticed the Special Police rushing by. They finally caught him. There was also an American movie actor in the ranks and an ex-convict who ran crap games.

I continued drawing as often as I could. I was even approached by the Sergeant Major to do an oil portrait of King George in airforce uniform. I had to go to the Toronto Star to research his ribbons and I worked at my old studio on Lowther Avenue where my girlfriend was staying. At the unveiling at the Sergeant's Mess, one old vet noticed one of the ribbons out of order. I had to get the photo back from the Star and reposition it on the painting.



For the first year in England in 1943 I served as a staff pilot on an RAF training base called Morten Valence near Gloucester. It involved flying newly arrived Canadian crews around England to familiarize them with flying conditions there - 2 weeks night flying then 2 weeks on days. We averaged 3 or more hours a trip. If you agreed to stay on the job you could become a squadron commander with the rank of Squadron Leader and more pay. Canadian pilots weren't interested. We just wanted to get onto operational flying.

My Poetry Career

To while away the time on long boring trips with student crews I would compose poems and send them to my sister Jean in Toronto. She wrote back that maybe I should keep my mind on the airspeed. I never knew whether she was more concerned about my safety or my sanity, but it ended my poetry career.

Thankless is her task
Yet cheery is her smile
She has known better things
But complaints are not in style
Mary is a batman
For officers young and gay
In they come and out again
Thinking little of her pay
Let's pause awhile my playboys
In our rush to leave the spot
She's fighting just as we are
So don't forget the pot!

This poem was set beside a jar to raise money for the batmen who looked after us, most of whom were women.





Broom Drill



The Sergeant Major made me an acting corporal, which gave me a certain rank. This caught up to me one day when I was told I would have to instruct a rifle drill, which I knew nothing about. With the help of a broom and an experienced airman friend I practiced frantically. The day I had to appear in front of a squad was intimidating to say the least. As soon as I started demonstrating I knew I was in trouble. Finally a Yank in the front line took the rifle and said he'd show how to do it. I let him. That was the last time anyone asked me to do rifle drill. I even got off the Sunday church parades by listing myself as an agnostic. The Sergeant didn't know what that meant.

Stooging Along

Stooging along over the sea

Angels two, viz three

Stooging along over the sea

Angels one, viz two.

Stooging along over the blue

Christ how long will it be?

Angels three hundred, viz one hundred

Stooging along - stooging

Angels zero Angels!



While stationed at Morten Valence, the first Gloucester Meteor Jet was shipped there „under wraps” for testing. It was to be the fastest twin-engine plane in the war. This was supposed to be top secret but even the barmaids knew about it. Tiny the test pilot was the tallest of them all at 6’ 6”. He slept in a guarded hangar with the jet but frequented the mess. It was a marvel, but one day, on a test, it blew up in the air and crashed. Tiny’s remains were scattered across a mile of fields. He was given a huge funeral in London attended by all the top brass. It was a heavy loss and everyone was saddened, except the Germans.



Joe

While serving as staff pilot in training command I was sent to London on a Group Leaders' course. There was a lot of boredom in training command and, in an effort to overcome it, discussion groups were organized by the RAF. When I returned to base to get the groups started, I found resistance from the ground crew who didn't trust officers. My batman, Corporal Joe, proved helpful in persuading some of his buddies to attend. Joe was a gray-haired family man and, being a socialist, we became good friends. We made a deal with the padre that we would support his services if he would support our groups. A few good discussions finally emerged.

Later Joe was transferred to ground crew, guiding night landings at the airstrip. One night after a flight, I taxied my plane to the parking strip where the ground crew guided us in with flashlights. When I cut the engine I noticed a commotion in front of the plane beside me. I approached the small crowd and was horrified to find Joe lying under a propeller with



his body decapitated. He really hadn't been trained for this job and in the darkness he got too close. Although devastated, I didn't cry but was overcome with an all-consuming rage against the fascist bastards. War is insanity.

As a staff pilot I visited the Mosquito Squadron in the south of England. These Canadian-made planes were the fastest we had. I did an oil portrait of a pilot who was on his second tour (one tour was 33 trips). He was like a guitar string as he sat there and I thought he was in no shape to be flying. He went out that night and didn't return. On the train back to the base I was thinking about him and forgot my paintbox. In desperation I got in touch with the Red Cross. They located it and left it at the station for me. The pilot had a sister in the service he had told about the portrait. She later contacted me and we met in London where I gave her the portrait. A copy of it is now in the War Museum in Ottawa.

Finally, after serving a year at the training base, my name was posted to Operational Training at Welsbourne Montford in central England. I had to pick up a crew but I think they picked me because I had so many flying hours in already. We were 425 Squadron. That's how I met Norman Speevak from Montreal. We were "lefties" with mutual friends. His cousin Marty was the navigator. The co-pilot's name was Jack Padget from Toronto. Norman and Marty were Jewish and Padget was anti-semitic. It didn't contribute to crew harmony. There was a real urgency to get through operational training while the war was still on. Norman hadn't passed two of the bombing runs and Padget implied that he really didn't want to pass them. Norman then thought to have the bomb-sights on the aircraft checked out, and found that they were unserviceable. Finally we got a good one and he passed with flying colours. Then he got a cold and went on sick parade, which added to the tension.

One night on the way back from the airstrip, after parking the Lancaster bomber, Padget and I were walking together. Finally he let it out and referred to Speevak as a "yellow kike". This was too much; I lost control and hammered him into the barbed wire fence. I had come all the way to fight fascists and here was one in my own crew! Anyway, we decided to put the war ahead of personal feelings and kept

the crew as it was. I never mentioned this to Norman until years after the war.

It was one of the pilot's responsibilities to keep crew harmony and encourage everyone to pull together. The tail-gunner was Boissoneau, a kid from Montreal, and Hap was the mid-upper from a farm out west. They were from different planets. Boissoneau thought

Hap was a yokel with a plough in his hands. Harmony? Forget it!

One night we were flying at 15,000 feet where you need oxygen. On making the regular 15-minute cockpit check, I found the oxygen dial registered empty. I called each crew member - OK navigation? OK mid-upper? OK tail? There was no answer from the tail-gunner Boissoneau. While diving off height I told Hap to take an emergency oxygen mask back to Boissoneau but not to give him more than three whiffs or it could kill him. Hap was back there in 10 seconds. The tail-gunner was unconscious.

Hap brought him around with the emergency oxygen and I had dived off enough height so that we were breathing on our own. After that flight the two gunners got along like stink. The tail couldn't do enough for the mid-upper from then on. Years later Norman told me that Boissoneau had been smoking back there. If I had known I would have had to report it and it was a court martial offence. *C'est la guerre.*





Florence

I had a lot of time to paint and draw so I did portraits to raise money for the Red Cross. After getting our crew of six together for operational training we would go to London on leaves. I met a woman named Florence who was the secretary of the Anglo Soviet Friendship Association that was raising money for Russian aid. The head of this committee was Hewlitt Johnson, the Red Dean of Canterbury. He had written a book about the Soviet Union called *The Socialist Sixth of the World*, which had international circulation. He was an embarrassment to the church but there was nothing they could do about it. Florence introduced me to him and we had a fascinating one-hour conversation. I decided to raise money for them doing portraits, as the Russians were carrying the brunt of the war. I managed to donate about \$2000 over time.

On one of these trips to London, Florence invited my bomb aimer, Norman Speevak and me to a meeting of French Resistance women and their supporters. These women had killed hundreds of Germans. At the end of the meeting they had to catch a train so Norman said, "We are strong Canadians, we will carry your bags. One woman shot back "We are strong too. We carry our own bags!" At the end of the war at the Victory Parade in Paris, the "march past" of these heroic women took over two hours amid cheering crowds.

Sometimes it Pays to be Late

One night the plane I was to fly was unserviceable. I had to get checked out on another plane and that made me half an hour late to catch up with the squadron. It was a clear night so visibility was good. We were flying south and I could see the last plane about 100 yards ahead. A wireless message on our radio had just warned us to look out for a



German intruder in the vicinity when suddenly, the plane ahead was blown to pieces. I dived to a lower altitude. It was one of my buddies. It could have been me.

A short time later I did a portrait of a Group Captain who commanded a fighter squadron of single-engine Typhoons. His wife, who was the meteorology officer and a friend had set it up with the idea of getting me transferred to his squadron I even bought a round of beer to celebrate. A week went by, then 2 weeks, finally she phoned him for me. He told her that he had such a high mortality rate on his squadron that he was reluctant to have me transferred. I was 26 and had been trained on twin-engine bombers. He said I should keep painting.

On one occasion we were engaged in a prisoner-of-war escape exercise. It was my fate to be one of the escapees to be pursued by "the enemy". We were given some thirty minutes head start to head across the fields and look for a hideout. I saw a nearby cottage and decided to chance seeking help there. I knocked on the door. An elderly woman answered. Explaining that this was an escape exercise, I asked if I could take refuge there for a while. She invited me in, introduced me to her sister and prepared tea. As we engaged in pleasant conversation I watched through the window as the pursuers ran madly about looking behind trees and sheds for the escapees. On completion of the exercise, I enjoyed telling how tough it was being an escaped prisoner.

Leaves in London could be boring, just hanging out with the guys, so I arranged an introduction to William Claus who was head of an art society there. He would hire a model and we would get together and paint. He liked to lay the paint on thick, let it dry by a heater for a day, then scrape the surface before the next session. This proved too cumbersome for me so on the next leave I attended the Slade School of Art in Oxford. During a Life Drawing class I had quickly drawn the whole figure as was the procedure in Canada. I had deluded myself into thinking that I was a pretty good draughtsman. The older instructor peered at the drawing and suggested that I spend the rest of the period drawing "the shoulder". Looking at the work displayed on the walls I realized how thorough they were about drawing and how superficial our training was in comparison. That lesson was worth all my previous training.

I had been impressed by the work of Felix Topolski and even tried to emulate his style. My friend Diana Warnock arranged for me to visit his studio. He let me look through a trunk full of his drawings. After telling him how impressed I was with his work, he gave me two ink drawings. I gave one to Diana and I still prize the other to this day. On the next visit he was off working as a war artist but his girlfriend invited me in anyway. She was entertaining two U.S. generals so I excused myself and spent the time looking through his work. She told me that he had been impressed by my work so I left one of my sketches for him. I later discovered a sketch of this woman in a book of his on England at War.



By 1945 the sky was full of planes. At an airfield in the south of England one plane would be coming in to land while another was still on the runway and a third taxiing to take off again like a shuttle system. On VE-Day victory was declared and the whole country went wild. I happened to be in London that day and millions of people were rejoicing. While walking through the crowds in Picadilly Circus I bumped into Major Jeff Preston from Stratford who was with the Perth Regiment. We had attended high school together and he was the brother of my sister-in-law Helen! While riding the underground I noticed a soldier standing beside me with a Perth Regiment badge on his shoulder. I asked him if he knew Bob Patterson who was a major in that regiment and my best friend. He said he was with him when he got shot in Italy. I was stunned. He was a great guy and a natural leader... what a loss. On returning to Stratford after the war I looked up his wife and told her about Bob. I still think of him. He was the brother of Tom Patterson, the founder of the Stratford Festival.





Home Again

The problem of shipping thou sands of airmen back to Canada was horrendous. No excuse for not returning, compassionate or other wise, was even considered. My tail gunner Hap Boissonnault was madly in love with a girl from Bournemouth. He was determined to marry her before leaving so he kept scratching a cut on he back of his hand until it was infect ed, then went on sick parade and was detained for treatment He got off the draft long enough to get married and he finally took his new wife home with him. About two years later they were divorced.

Upon being returned to Canada at the end of the war, we were stationed at a big holding camp outside of Halifax. The war against Japan was still raging and we were kept there in the event of having to be sent over there to fight. Then Truman dropped the atomic bomb, which ended the war and we were sent to Manning Depot in Toronto for discharge. I was angry about the war and the way Canadians appeared to have survived so well compared to the English. Families had gathered at the Depot to greet the returning forces It was very emotional to see members of my family and others in the bleachers, all looking for their sons and daughters. There were many airmen with bandages and on crutches.

I stayed with my sister Jean and her husband Hugh Shortill in Toronto. Having come home engaged to a girl from Edinburgh, I was worried about what I was going to do next. Before going home to Stratford I went to Chicago to visit Niftie Griffin who offered me a job in publishing. That didn't appeal to me so I went to the Art Institute for a week before finally returning to Stratford. My one plan was to enroll at the Ontario College of Art in Toronto. I attended the funeral of the president of the college, Fred Hanes with my landlady Verlie Ridley. She pointed out how poor all the artists in attendance looked. In the meantime my brother-in-law Hugh was inquiring how I would support a wife as an art student and suggested I go into the real estate business with him where a good living was to be made. Reality raised its ugly head. I went into real estate.

Correspondence with my fiancee Stella became strained and finally it became apparent that our expectations were quite different. It was almost a sense of relief when she informed me she had met an Englishman and was going to marry him. C est la guerre!

