

David Cornish
British Evacuee
Child
Oronsay
1940



WAR GUESTS COME TO PEI: A MEMOIR BY DAVID CORNISH

During the recent PWC reunion I was at a get-together at the home of Clive and Fleur Stewart who have built on the Stewart farm at Bellevue. Clive reminded me that I was standing on the spot where I first stayed in Canada fifty years ago, after coming from England as a war guest. His remark opened up a flood of memories for me and I was later urged by Hon. Gordon Bennett to tell the story of how twenty-five British schoolchildren came to PEI in the summer of 1940.

After the fall of France in the spring of 1940, it was considered only a matter of time before the Germans launched an invasion of the British Isles. The government initiated a plan to evacuate some 200,000 school children to other parents of the British Commonwealth. (A sad note is that, after about 5000 children were evacuated, the scheme was abandoned in the fall of 1940 when a ship was sunk and 75 children lost, including five from one family). Participation was voluntary and, after a family "conference" around the dining room table, it was agreed I would apply: whereas my eleven-year-old sister chose otherwise. The application contained a list of countries and you were asked to name them in order of preference; at the head of my list was Canada.

After some time an official package arrived advising I had been selected to go to Canada with the first group. To a thirteen year old boy, this was an exciting adventure; to my parents, I am sure, it was something else. In any event it was thought I would be back in about a year. I recall a train trip to Brighton to say goodbye to my grandparents; the instructions were that only the immediate family were to know. So, I left for Canada without saying goodbye to all the school chums at Purley County School for Boys. My father saw me off on the train to London, and we discovered another boy from my school wearing the same very prominent tag CORB (Children's Overseas Reception Board) as myself; it was Tony Kissinger who went to my school but whom I barely knew. We both wore the school uniform, maroon coloured bands in the school colours, maroon and yellow at the top. Tony and I became instant friends and this continued since he also was one of the groups who came to PEI

In London we met up with several hundred kids ranging in age from five to fifteen, all bound for Canada. From London we were sent for a few days to a vacant school in Kent (the students had been evacuated to Devon). We were told "the convoy was being made up". While there I had a sudden panic attack about leaving home and I was allowed to call home. I was warned not to say where I was or when I might be sailing; and a supervisor was at my elbow to ensure this. (This was a time of wartime security with many posters in public places, including one reading "Loose Lips Sink Ships"). Our group went from Kent to Liverpool, staying overnight in a school gymnasium. At that time Liverpool endured almost nightly bombings, and that night was no exception. Fortunately for us we were well away from the dock area.

The following afternoon we boarded ship. It was a P & O liner named Oronsay which had been converted to a troop ship (very cramped quarters!) We sailed sometime during

the night and coming on deck the next day we found ourselves part of an unusual convoy. There were about six large passenger liners, I remember one was the Georgic (it's passengers were German POWs), another one of the Duchess ships. At the head of the convoy was a battleship, HMS Revenge, on the perimeter were six destroyers. We were told the convoy speed was fifteen knots, whereas the normal merchant convoy was eight to ten. It was considered that no submarine at that time could keep up to that speed. We felt quite secure! The destroyers turned back after half way as this was thought to be the outer range for submarines at that time, (the tragedy of the later ship was that it was torpedoed after the escorts had turned back). Soon after the destroyers left us, one of the ships developed engine trouble and the convoy had to reduce speed. The main concern was the German "pocket" battleships which ranged all over the Atlantic; and no doubt the reason for our escort, HMS Revenge.

In any event, our nine days voyage was without incident, except for sea sickness. I recall around eight "invalids" including myself, laid out on the rear deck. We all agreed to skip the noon dinner (food was unthinkable!). One of the other boys in our group was sent up from the dining room with the message "Chief Steward says you've got to come". As our friend was going back down below he tossed a remark over his shoulder "It's fish and chips today". There was a virtual stampede to the dining room and that was the end of the mal-de-mer! Even the tongue-lashing we got from the Chief Steward couldn't deter us from enjoying one of the cornerstones of British fare.

During our voyage the Battle of Britain was joined in the air over England. I recall news bulletins posted daily telling of the great heroism

of the RAF and giving the number of German planes destroyed. As history now knows, failure to command the skies over Britain caused the Germans to put the invasion on indefinite hold; a turning point in the war. The fiftieth anniversary of the Battle of Britain will be duly recognized, all over the world.

I believe the ship carried about 500 school children, around 2000 were in the convoy. Our on-board supervisors were British schoolteachers, thus there was no lack of discipline. They were also very informative about Canada. The day before landing in Halifax, a group of 25 were told to meet a supervisor in a corner of the dining room. It was then that we were informed we were being sent to PEI. Maps and travel brochures were closely scrutinized, everyone was excited. When we landed in Halifax, the excitement grew. Many children left immediately for other parts of Canada; because of train schedules our group remained overnight in Halifax.

Everything was new to us and very exhilarating. Everything was BIG (trains, cards, etc.). Everyone was so friendly and warm. My recollections of the train trip to Charlottetown are of gatherings of people at each stop to welcome and chat with us. Kids on bikes followed the train from the stations and demonstrating their coaster brakes, which were incredible to us (look, they peddle backwards to stop). Someone on the ferry calling us refugees, which we laughed at (we're not refugees, we came by choice, we're war guests). It was not the last time that fine distinction had to be explained. I recall kids selling huge lobsters at Borden alongside the train for 10 cents apiece. We were eager, but our nurse-supervisor ruled this out!

We were astonished, on arrival in Charlottetown, to find thousands of people, we wondered what the attraction was and asked the nurse. She replied with a laugh "Why they're here to see you kids!". It was pretty heady stuff and not without problems that we were given, what would be called today, "special status". After greetings from the Premier, Thane Campbell, and Lieut. Governor LePage, we were taken in card to the Stewart farm. We were to spend two weeks there, the official reason was that it was a quarantine but looking back I realize we were also being assessed and then being matched up with volunteer foster parents.

In what has to be one of the great magnanimous gestures of all time, thousands of people all across Canada signed up to take one or more British schoolchildren. There was no compensation and a small subsistence allowance provided for each child did not cover expenses. Peter Raven and I were sent to the home of Mr. & Mrs. Ernest Champion - two thirteen year old boys to the home of a couple without children. They deserved the George medal for valor!

While at the Stewart farm, the boys were in army tents, the girls at the old house. Miss Jessie Fullerton was in charge (no lack of discipline there either!), assisted by Helen Lawson, a nurse, Miss Reay, also a student minister (cannot recall his name). Hon. Horace Wright was the cabinet member of the PEI government responsible for CORB and visited with us. It was like a summer holiday camp, lots of swimming in the cove, picnics on the beach, and singsongs around the campfire. Blackouts and bombings were light years away.

The day finally came to go to our foster parents. We packed up and dressed in our best. It was a beautiful August day and first we had a ceremony to attend. It happened that the Governor General, the Earl of Athlone and his fiancée, Princess Alice, were visiting Charlottetown. She had expressed a wish to meet our group, so it was arranged to coincide with the planned review of the Girl Guides of the Province on the lawn of Government House. She spoke to many of us in spite of the response she got from the first boy she spoke to. In reply to her question “where is your home” this boy blurted out “England!” She laughed and pried out of him his home county and town. She was a charming lady.

It was then time to disperse to our foster homes. As I recall, we were all quite nervous at meeting our foster parents for the first time. I cannot recall any “goodbyes” with others in the group, many of whom we lost touch with. As I’ve said, Peter Raven and I went to the Champions on Longworth Ave. Others I recall were Pamela and Neil Foster (five and seven years old) who went next door to Reg. and Mabel Aitkens; my school mate, Tony Kissinger, to Mr. & Mrs. Erskine MacNutt (until their family expanded, then he went to Mr. Burnett, editor of the Guardian); Gordon Taylor to Major and Mrs. Macnutt; Cyril Hinchelwood to Mr. & Mrs. Art Roper; Malcolm Joyce to Dr. and Mrs. Pierce; Margaret Martin to Miss Annie Love. Other children's names come to mind, such as Audrey Pitt but I can’t match them up with foster parent names.

I know that in Peter’s and my case, the nervousness after meeting Ernest and Elaine Champion was short lived. Looking back, it was a wonderful home and we were extremely fortunate to have been sent there. It did not take long to become a family. Out in the City, still wearing our British school uniform (Peter’s blazer was royal blue, mine maroon) it was not hard to spot us! Thus the heady attention continued. However, when we were still wearing short pants in the late fall a called-out remark on the streets of Charlottetown made us realize it was time for a change. It was “I’ve seen better legs on a kitchen table!” Shortly after we got our first pair of long pants! When we outgrew the school blazers, except for our accents (which was often heard later when the RAF came

to Charlottetown) we melded into the background as PEI teenagers; which was all to the good.

I returned to England in the summer of 1945 having reached the age of conscription. Then the war ended. I had grown up in PEI, my friends were all there: I was more homesick in England than I can ever recall. I was determined to return to Canada but it took almost two years to book passage. Finally, I got a passage to a US Merchant ship to New York. Then I had to be accepted as an immigrant and went to Canada house to be interviewed by an officer of the Canadian Government. I overheard him turn down the person ahead of me and he sounded quite gruff. He quizzed me abruptly and at some length, writing on the form in front of him. Somewhat anxiously, I asked, "How do I stand?". He broke an unexpected smile and turned my application around for me to read. He had written, "Highly 'Canadianized' young man, Accepted!"

I would guess that given the opportunity the majority of the British children who spent the war years in Canada would have chosen to remain or return. I recall writing in Mrs. Champion's guest book at Keppoch after returning to PEI in 1947, "Back home, this time to stay."