

John Hughes
British Evacuee
Child
Duchess of York
August 20, 1940



John Hughes born April
23, 1929 at Byker, Newcastle-Upon-Tyne, England
C.O.R.B. 1824

In the late summer of 1939, my mother, sister and I were evacuated to the village of Embleton in Northumberland from my home town of Newcastle Upon Tyne. We returned home a few months later when an expected invasion did not happen.

Some thought was given to overseas evacuation in 1939, using some ships that would supply British and North American troops with food and equipment. This was to complement the private evacuation of middle class children.

Reception of Children's Overseas report was presented and discussed by War Cabinet on June 17, 1940, the same day as the French Army surrendered. There were doubts the plan would proceed, but the scheme was approved by cabinet the same day. Mr. Atlee presented the Children's Overseas Reception Board plan to the House of Commons on June 19, 1940.

On June 20, 1940 C.O.R.B. opened for business at newly acquired headquarters on Berkeley Street. In 10 days 40,000 applications were received and in 14 days the number of applications had risen to over 211,000 which was about half the number of eligible children. Less than a month later, the first C.O.R.B. party had set sail for Canada from the port of Liverpool.

On June 21, 1940, Prime Minister Winston Churchill had misgivings about the C.O.R.B. scheme, saying the public's response smacked of panic. War Cabinet decided to adopt a cooling policy aimed at damping down the hysterical response to the scheme, by underlining the risks involved, the transport difficulties, and the need to accept only a small number of children. Dangers at sea from aircraft, submarines weighed against being exposed to invasion and air-raids.

Cabinet on July 1, 1940 decided that C.O.R.B. should close its application lists to the public. Sir Geoffrey Shakespear, who was at first

against the plan, presented a summary of C.O.R.B.'s position to the House of Commons for debate the following day. With ships not available and insufficient warships to protect the evacuee ships the scheme seemed doomed, but Sir Geoffrey convinced the House that the evacuation should be carried out.

Only 3119 children were accepted and of that about 1600 came to Canada, 149 to Nova Scotia. By July 3, 1940 some parents received notification that their children had been provisionally accepted. About half of the C.O.R.B. evacuees went abroad without any sort of consultation by their parents.

After return to Newcastle from Embleton I attended Victoria Jubilee School, our teacher told us about the C.O.R.B. scheme and showed us tourist posters of countries to which we could be evacuated. The Canadian one of a Mountie on a black horse in a wheat field with the Rockies in the background attracted my attention. I took an application form home and told my mother that I wanted to go to Canada, to which she agreed because of the impending dangers. Soon afterwards, a letter was received from C.O.R.B. stating that I had been accepted for evacuation overseas, but not to tell anyone about it. Later a letter was received regarding what we should have in the way of clothing, etc. and food for the train journey to the embarkation port. Also was a document that had to be signed by my parents and returned to C.O.R.B. absolving them of any liability.

Everything had to be ready in case the call came to leave home for the railway station, which it did in early August, 1940. I left Central Station for Glasgow in an adventurous mood, but that quickly changed as the train pulled out of the station and I left my family behind. In Glasgow we were housed at the Albert Street school, which I disliked very much because of the poor washroom facilities and the itchy grey woolen blankets on our cots. I was very home-sick and almost wanted to return home.

After many various medical and dental check-ups, time came to leave by bus for Greenock and boarding of the Duchess of York. We set sail on August 10, 1940 in convoy ZA which also included the Oronsay, the Antonia, a total of 1131 evacuee and a number of other ships. Our escort included six destroyers and the battleship HMS Revenge. Three other liners were also important troop carriers and warranted the exceptional naval protection.

On board the Duchess of York everything went smoothly daily emergency life-boat drills, movies, games, plenty of good food (including daily Bovril) and baths in salt water. Most of the children were sea-sick. I still

remember the smell of the diesel fumes and the smells from the gallery. On deck I would watch the other ships, especially the naval escort and another large liner I believed to be the Georgic. A ship was sunk but we couldn't stop to pick up survivors because of the almost 500 children on board the Duchess of York. After nine or ten days at sea, we arrived in Halifax. We spent the night on board ship and I marveled at the city lights. The next day we disembarked at Pier 21, went through the immigration check and received hot chocolate and cookies. Halifax seemed so green and clean. The trains, cars and even the people seemed to be much bigger than in England. Children destined for places in other parts of Canada were entertained while those who stayed in Nova Scotia waited to be picked up by their designated hosts. Some of us were housed in the School for the Blind and while there underwent more medical examinations. We played on the property which was enclosed by a high iron fence. Local children would do errands for us, get chocolate bars etc. We were given car drives by local people and on one of those occasions I was taken to the Dingle by a Mr. Chappel and his son. Many years later, as a pharmacist, I worked for Mr. Chittick whose daughter was married to a Mr. Chappel (possibly the son?)

Finally on the Labour day week-end, Mabel and Charlie Dodge arrived at the School for the Blind to take me to their farm north of Middleton in the Annapolis Valley. On the way, we stopped in Kingston at Vera Marshall's (Mabel's sister) for supper of corn on the cob and tomatoes, then on to Middleton. We stopped at Mumford's Rexall Drug Store so Charlie could buy some cigarettes (years later I apprenticed in the same store and owned it from 1970-1975).

The day following Labour day, I started school at MacDonald Consolidated School in Grade 5. I found the work very easy and at the end of the school year graduated into Grade 7. As an evacuee, I received free medical and dental care and was given a pass to the local skating rink. In Grade 7 I was president of the Junior Red Cross, started to play Saturday morning hockey and ski.

Mr. Blois, NS Director of Child Welfare and his assistant Fred MacKinnon, who were responsible for the placement of the children in Nova Scotia, would travel throughout the province to check on the evacuees and their hosts to see that everything was all right. In 1941 Sir Geoffrey Shakespeare met with a group of evacuees in the valley area at the United Church in Middleton.

British troops who were housed at Camp Aldershot would come to Middleton and other valley towns as guests of the local people. I got to know a number of them and enjoyed their company. Greenwood became the site of an air force base and many R.A.F. were there training

on the different planes. Evacuees from the valley were invited to the Christmas parties. We were well fed and entertained and received many gifts. I built a plane spotting seat and cabinet between the chimney and roof of the garage, would get my book on plane identification and check out the planes as they flew overhead.

I enjoyed my almost five years in Middleton with the Dodges who treated me as their son, but when the war ended I was anxious to return home to see my family again.

In July 1945 I boarded the liner Louis Pasteur at Pier 21 with a number of other children returning to the U.K. It was a fine, fast ship and in 4 1/2 days we arrived in the port of Southampton. While taking the train to London and the bus from Waterloo station to King's Cross we saw all the damage done during the war.

Arriving at Newcastle by train it was a marvelous sight approaching the city over the river Tyne. At Central Station and being met by family members completed my C.O.R.B. experience.

Soon there was a big welcome home party for me where I met other relatives and former friends. However, many of my friends had moved away and things did not quite seem the same. The city seemed to be gray and dreary after living in Canada, rationing was still in effect and there seemed to be little chance to get a higher education. I worked with my uncle George in his coal business and in long-distance trucking but the longing to return to Canada never waned. I wrote the Dodge's to see if I could stay with them again. They were only too happy to help, and my parents, reluctantly I think, agreed that it would be in my best interest.

In March 1947 I took the train to London, boarded the boat-train at Waterloo station for Southampton and embarked on the Aquitania for Halifax. This time I came to Pier 21 as a landed immigrant and intended to stay.

I returned to school the next day and completed my high school education, taking part in drama, debating, year book, hockey and became Commanding Officer of the Royal Canadian Army Cadets with a rank of Major.

After completing the Elementary Course in Pharmacy and working at Mumford's Drug Store, I attended the Maritime College of Pharmacy in Halifax and graduated in 1953 with a diploma in Pharmacy and received my B.Sc. the following year from Dalhousie University. During the summers, as a member of the C.O.T.C. (Canadian Officer's Training Corps), I trained at Valcartier and at LeCitadel in Quebec, Workpoint

near Victoria BC and at York Redoubt near Halifax, receiving my commission in the Royal Canadian Artillery.

In 1954, I married Adele Conrad and we have 5 children and 5 grandchildren.

After 26 years in retail Pharmacy during which I owned and operated Mumford's Drug Store in Middleton for 5 years, I became Director of Pharmacy at Soldier's Memorial Hospital from which I retired in 1993. I have been active in the community as town councilor for 12 years, fund raising chairman of the Annapolis East unit of the Canadian Cancer Society, participant and canvasser for the Heart and Stroke Big Bike Ride, Past member of the Masonic lodge, past president of the Western Valley Shrine Club, past-president of the Valley Scottish Rite Club and a volunteer for Meals on Wheels.

My Wife and I traveled extensively, especially since retirement and each time I am very happy when we arrive back in Nova Scotia. I shall always give thanks to Pier 21, for that was where I first entered Canada and I shall always remember the excellent official opening ceremonies on July 1, 1999 and our recent C.O.R.B. re-union there on September 16, 2000.

Thank You!