

William 'Bill' Pineo
WWII Veteran
June 1940

CANADA'S IMMIGRATION MUSEUM PIER 21



HALIFAX HARBOUR, JUNE
1940



Minesweepers, accompanied by destroyers bristling with guns, were getting organized in order to protect a convoy of troop ships soon to be heading across the Atlantic.

For most of those on board the ships, it was the beginning of a great adventure: this being their first time away from Canada.

As they gathered on the decks assigned to them, a sense of anticipation was evident, as young minds vividly projected exciting pictures of what lay ahead of them.

Now and then, their thoughts traveled back over the miles to those they would be leaving behind; some perhaps, forever.

Suddenly the air was filled with the beautiful clear voice of Gracie Fields echoing throughout the harbour. It had to be the favourite of almost everyone, and the timing was most appropriate.

"Wish me luck as you wave me goodbye." A short silence was followed by another great song, as the ships started to move into their respective positions. "We'll meet again, don't know where, don't know when, but I know we'll meet again some sunny day." A song shared by both Gracie and Vera Lynn. The silence on the ships was broken by cheers, and it is almost certain that the day will remain in the memory of all those who were there.

It does not matter that it may have been a recording. Someone on the shore was concerned about those leaving, and thoughtfully played the songs. It was an episode that should be included in Canadian Military History.

Mackenzie King in London, 1942

Canadian Military Headquarter - {CMHQ} London, Eng. WWII

A fellow dispatch rider, Jack Seeley and I, were called in to see the commanding officer around noon one day and told to report to Mr. Turnbull, secretary to the Prime Minister of Canada, whom we heard, had just arrived in London. The two of us were chosen out of a group of other bike riders, but don't know to this day why we were picked.

There was a meeting in England made up of the leaders of the countries that formed the British Commonwealth to discuss the war's progress to date. The other Ministers were from New Zealand, Australia and South Africa.

The following morning Jack and I reported to Mr. Turnbull at the Dorchester Hotel across from Hyde Park. We were assigned a room on the same floor as the secretary and Mr. King, then told that we would be contacted when needed. We were under the impression that we were to be taking messages to various offices in London as required, but to this day, I can't recall even one request to do so.

Jack and I both carried firearms and as there were no security men around, was it possible that we were there as bodyguards? I would imagine that, had the necessity arose, we wouldn't have hesitated to use our 38s to protect the PM, but why weren't we informed? I suppose it's the old story of - "Ours is not to reason why."

We did have a few conversations with Mr. King and Mr. Turnbull. From one of them came the suggestion, that, as Jack and I had been away from home for a couple of years, we might accompany their party back to Canada for a short leave of a week or so.

This sounded great, but nothing came of it because of the possibility of setting a precedent for the many thousands of Canadian troops stationed in England; some there six months longer than Jack or myself. We were considered reinforcements for the first division. I was a very good decision on Mr. King's part. Speaking of the 1st div., which was stationed in Aldershot; when the PM paid them a visit, he was solidly booed by the troops. It seems that they were getting pretty annoyed at having to sit in their laurels for the past couple of years and were hoping to experience some action. It's difficult to say why they blamed the PM, though.

I too, had a small mishap, although not nearly as embarrassing. I had parked my Harley on the road in front of the hotel, gone up to my room, and when I came down, the bike was gone. It had been spotted unattended by the military police, and I guess through lack of communication, they assumed it their duty to take it in. Fortunately, it was only a few miles away and was returned to me after a couple of frantic phone calls. I explained about my being assigned to the Prime Minister of Canada, which they didn't believe at first and I couldn't blame them for that. I'm sure they had heard many such weird excuses in the course of their duties.

The PM's party finally headed home, glad to get away from the noise of sirens and bombs going off every night.

Jack and I did finally make the trip home, but it turned out to be three years later.

THE TRAIN RIDE

In the hungry thirties, riding the rails in good weather was a common and fairly pleasant undertaking; but, having to travel in below zero conditions, was quite the reverse. The extremely cold climate may have been tolerable for the hardy souls of Manitoba. To those from the moderate winters of Canada's West Coast, it was unbearable.

Our group had recently transferred from the 16th Canadian Scottish Regiment in Victoria to the P.P.C.L.I. at Fort Osbourne barracks in Winnipeg. It was soon obvious that February was not a good time to make such a move. We finally settled in our new quarters, very seldom stepping outside. For us, it virtually meant instant freezing of the ear lobes, plus a snapping shut of nostrils requiring laboured breathing through the mouth until one's teeth 'froze'.

We were well into our basic training, when they told us that we would be heading overseas fairly soon and we had two weeks to go home and say our good-byes. Many of us had no money for train fare, so we had to consider an alternate means of travel if we were to see our families again.

Many freight trains passed through Winnipeg daily and six of us made the decision to travel in this manner. I had left a girlfriend on Vancouver Island, as well as my immediate family and that probably proved the added incentive to make me do what I did. Had I known that after only a couple of months in England a 'Dear John' letter would arrive, I may not have been so eager to make such a trip.

With mighty little preparation, we arrived at the freight yard around eleven o'clock that night, being careful not to be seen by the C.P.R. police. In those days, they were hard on transients, either arresting them or, simply booting them off the trains.

There were no open boxcars. Under the circumstances, we were faced with the option of riding on top of one of them or make ourselves comfortable in an open gondola car that contained metal girders covered with heavy frost. We chose the latter, so that the police could not spot us. With our few extra clothes plus some food we managed to scrounge from the kitchen, we climbed aboard what was to be our home for the next few days or even weeks. We remained crouched, hidden until the freight train was well out of the yard before daring to stand up. We would drop back down quickly to avoid the breeze that, with the wind factored in, was more like 60 degrees.

Remembering day to day events as they happened is very difficult and I have to wonder, if by chance, the freezing weather was affecting my brain. A few things do stand out. Whenever the train slowed for any reason, we would slip off, running along side hanging onto the ladder, in order to start our blood circulating. Another vivid memory involves walking or crawling along the tops of swaying box cars, making our way towards the engine for a little heat from the coal fire. How we envied the train crew in their heated cab. I can't recall buying food once we had eaten everything available—so, we must have been very hungry along the way. It is doubtful that we had a dollar amongst the six of us.

I would have liked to talk over the experiences with those who made the trip. Unfortunately, with all the excitement of going to another country, we did not discuss the journey again. I hope that some of my fellow travelers will fill in some of the blanks of our trip when and if we meet again.

Memory does serve me, when we were somewhere in Alberta, because a miracle happened. As we were warming ourselves around a pot-belly stove under a water tank, a steel bridge gang, who had heard of our plight, offered us a ride through the mountains in their coach.

How does one offer thanks, except to say, "God bless them!"

It was still a long way to Vancouver when they dropped us off. This meant back up on the box cars and more choking black smoke for a few hours.

Getting to the Island and eventually Port Alberni, remains a mystery and put down to the possibility that the brain hadn't completely thawed out

by that time. After a short spell at home, it became apparent that I needed a way to get back to barracks and, of course, there was still no money for the fare. When our member of parliament heard the story, he had the authorities provide me with a ticket back to Winnipeg; but, had I known the problems ahead, I would have found another way back. I knew there might be trouble if I were late reporting to base. The bigger surprise was that the return fare was on my account. I did receive three day's C.B., which was no problem, as it was too cold to go outside anyway. The other part about my making good the cost of the ticket was really distressful.

The total pay, back then as a private in the army, amounted to \$40.00 a month of which \$25.00 went directly to my widowed mother. That meant getting by on the remaining fifteen. As I saw it, with no food or clothing to buy, that left fifty cents a day to blow. A package of tobacco and papers cost twenty cents and there was plenty left for soap and razor blades plus a few other frivolities. That is, until they started deducting for the train fare.

When we shipped out awhile later, it was my hope that the liability might stay in Canada, but it tagged right along. The first two years in the old country were a disaster money wise as they held back all but ten shillings a pay; which was barely enough for coffee.

The odd parcel with socks and candy did arrive from Canada, but no one could afford to send cash. It cost four dollars and forty seven cents Canadian to buy one British pound in the 1940's.

As a dispatch rider, I recall falling into a speed trap on my Harley and fined ten day's pay. This was not just ten times fifty cents, of course, but ten times a dollar and fifty cents. It took forever to pay off the fine.

I remember, things were so tough that my British bride and I chose Christmas day to be married because two celebrations were out of the question. Ration cards and money for extra food was a problem as well. The honeymoon cost nothing as we spent our one day at a friend's house a block from the church. There were no showers or wedding gifts, which was okay as we were living with my in-laws and did not require anything.

Five and half years from the time I landed in Britain, I returned to my home in Canada. Looking back through time, I have to wonder if I could have made the Guinness Book of Records as the most consistently broke soldier in Canada's Army.

Halifax Daily News
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REUNION A REALITY AFTER NEARLY 60 YEARS

Visit to maritime
museum set special
visit in motion

By Valerie Wilson

For almost 60 years,
Nanaimo resident
Bill Pineo has
reminisced about a
special June day in
1940.



Entertainer Gracie Fields, backed by a children's choir, stood on the bridge of the Duchess of Richmond, and sang for Pineo and the other troops headed across the Atlantic from Halifax.

He had no way of knowing that across the world, in Australia, Anne Miller, who sang with Fields that day, has long pondered the fate of those servicemen.

She had wanted to meet one of the brave men one day, to share their thoughts of that emotional departure.

That day arrived Friday, due mostly to the memory of Carrie-Ann Smith, a research librarian for the Halifax-based Pier 21 Society.



Pineo wrote a letter to the society last summer describing the day he and Miller have thought about for nearly 60 years.

"Suddenly, the air filled with the beautiful voice of Gracie Fields, echoing across the harbour," Pineo wrote. "It

matters not, that no one had seen Gracie in person. Just hearing her was proof that someone cared. Even though 60 years has passed, it is as vivid today as it was then, and likely could become a positive highlight of military history."

Miller, on a trip to Canada from Australia, visited the Pier 21 Society last month to look for a newspaper photo of her on the ship that day.

When Miller mentioned the photograph showed her singing beside Fields, Smith immediately remembered Pineo's letter and shared it with Miller, who then knew she had to meet Pineo before returning to Australia.

She wrote a letter that led to Friday's meeting.

"This is the highlight of my trip," Miller said Friday.

Pineo said he couldn't believe Miller also had vivid memories of the day Fields sang for the troops as they prepared to sail.

"It was as important to me at that time as it was to Anne," he said.

He was especially impressed Miller has over the years wondered what became of the men aboard the battle ships.

"Not too many people thought about it that way," Pineo said.

The fact Pineo lives in Nanaimo is ironic.

In 1940, when she was 11, Miller and her family had sailed from Liverpool to Halifax on their way to Singapore.

The war delayed the family's plans and they settled in Nanaimo until 1948 before moving to Australia.

Miller's visit Friday settled a friendly dispute between Pineo and his wife Pam.

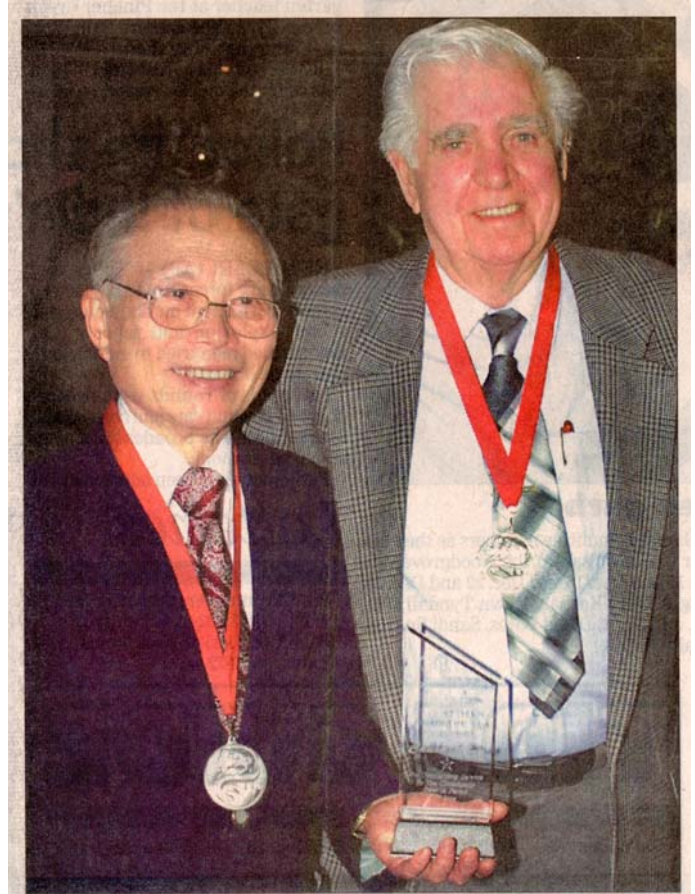
"My husband has always told me this story about Gracie Fields but I thought it was probably just a record playing and I didn't believe him," Pam Pineo said.

"Then we got the letter from Anne."



Wedding Anniversary

Bill and Pam Pineo were married Dec. 25, 1943 in London, England, while Bill was on active duty. They moved to Bill's home town of Port Alberni in 1945 along with their six-month-old son Alan. Two years later, Linda came along. They moved to Nanaimo in 1956 and then to Hawaii in 1964. They returned to Canada in 1973 and currently reside in Lantzville.



Volunteers of the year

The Greater Nanaimo Chamber of Commerce named Chuck Wong, left, and Bill Pineo as Joint Volunteer Citizens of the Year at a luncheon Wednesday. See Page A4 for story and more photos. (Glenn Olsen/Daily News)