



Canadians on Radar Background

In 1940, Great Britain stood alone against the Nazi horde. Her greatest need was for trained technicians to service and maintain her rapidly expanding radar defences. She appealed to Canada and Canada responded. From December 1940, to May 1943, five thousand trained Royal Canadian Air Force Radar Officers and Airmen Radar Mechanics passed through Pier 21 on their way overseas to serve with the Royal Air Force. Dispersed in penny packets from North Africa and Malta, from Sicily and Italy to



Northwest Europe, from the Murmansk Run to Australia, from Burma to Britain and "neutral" Turkey, these Canadian radar specialists provided over one third of the RAF's expertise in this critical, war-winning area. In all, over six thousand RCAF radar specialists were sent to serve with the Commonwealth and other Allied Air Forces.

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War Bride

Ottawa, 2000 A Veteran's Story and Pier 21 Halifax Remembered

I, Jacob Julien Olson was born in High River, Alberta, July 11, 1921. However, I grew to adulthood on a farm near Carstairs, north of Calgary. Having tasted the depression and drought of the thirties, I was

determined not to take up farming as a career. In the spring of 1941 while I was boarding in town to complete my grade 12, RCAF and RAF officers visited the school and outlined the need for special radio people for the war effort. That summer I enquired at the Recruiting Office about this need and was promptly signed up. This was Radar, a highly secret electronic Air Force undertaking.

For the general public, we were listed as being involved with radio direction finding (RDF). After completing basic training at the Edmonton Manning Depot, about ninety of us were loaded on a train for the journey



to Montreal where basic electrical engineering would be taught at McGill University. I recall that this first train trip was most interesting particularly the frequent stops made for coal and water to maintain the steam engine. The more knowledgeable travelers would hop off the train and pick up beer at the local hotel near the railway station. Even so, we all arrived at McGill University on January 23rd

1942. The RCAF had taken over the men's residence on campus and we were fitted in wherever a lecture hall became available. Consequently, we got to use most of the University's facilities. Instruction was intense and all were dedicated students determined to pass exams and avoid being remustered to another trade. However, on Saturdays we were required to take a route march to the top of Mount Royal and back before receiving a pass that allowed us to be off campus until Sunday evening.

After completing this training, on May 16th, a short leave was given to visit one's home. One then returned to Clinton, Ontario where the RAF had established its Radar School. Training was divided into two categories, one for ground equipment operation and the second for air borne use. Again training was intense with periodic exams to establish qualified radar mechanics. Upon graduation, we were given another short leave and then sent to Halifax for overseas duty. Hence my first encounter with Pier 21, being loaded on the troop ship Awatea a former New Zealand passenger vessel of 16,000 tons. Our large convoy sailed out on August the 20th. Late that first night, submarines attacked the convoy. We were suddenly awakened by a great shudder and noise when all lights went out. Finding no emergency lanterns in operation, (likely never serviced since the ship was built) we had a difficult time getting dressed and climbing up three decks in the pitch dark. When finally on deck, not a ship was to be seen on the bright moonlit ocean. Convoys do not stop for a ship in distress. The lifeboats were slung over the sides but the order to evacuate was not given. However, all were ordered not to

light cigarettes or drop anything on the desk in case a submarine was listening. Thankfully, the front bulkhead held out the sea from the front end, which was torn off to below the water line. At daybreak engines were started for the journey back to Halifax. A cheer went up in the afternoon when the first destroyer arrived to escort us back to Halifax. Late August 24th, we were back at Pier 21, our second visit. Information we received was that a USA escort ship cut in front of ours to attack a submarine, it likely being hit by a torpedo, as it was lost. Our ship plowed into the American ship.

We were confined to camp until the next convoy was formed, and we left Pier 21 (third visit) on September 29th on the passenger liner Athlone Castle, it being 29,000 ton in size. This time we did not sail in the "coffin corner" of the convoy, instead, in the centre and made it successfully to disembark on October 8th at Liverpool. There the troop train took us to Bournemouth on the south coast for allocation to an RAF station. I and two other mechanics were assigned to 23OTU Pershore near Worcester (an operational training squadron training air crew for bomber command) arriving there on November 14th. We serviced the aircraft radar equipment that enabled aircrews to find their target at night as well as their home airdrome, thus preventing aircraft losses and enabled the RAF to attack German targets.

It was at this station that I met my future wife, Lilian Rose, who was serving her country in the Royal Air Force. It was not until a Christmas party in 1943 that I had the courage to ask her for a date to go into Worcester to see a movie. We got along fine but we were soon separated as I was posted on February 28th, 1944, to a Research Centre in Malvern to learn the secrets of a new target finding radar (OBOE).

Lilian was born in Dover, England, and spent enjoyable years with a number of aunts, uncles and cousins nearby. She missed having normal times with her father, who was an army man, staying in the Army after WWI. Her father had a number of postings including a number of years in Egypt. Her father retired from the Army just before WWII started, but stayed on as a Civilian Military Paymaster.



The family moved frequently, spending some time in London where the office was bombed out. A move to Canterbury was short lived as it was in the path of German bombers, resulting in a damaged office. The next move to Manchester also resulted in another bombing loss. The pay office was then moved to Southport, north of Liverpool, a safer location. While there, Lilian joined the WAAF having reached the age when all were subject to military service. She elected to become a cook so, with training, she was one of the cooks for over one thousand airmen on a large station. No home cooked meals were possible.

After getting my OBOE training, I was sent to 109 Royal Air Force (Pathfinder) Squadron located near Bedford. Only two squadrons were fitted with this equipment. They used high flying Mosquito aircraft that were ground controlled to drop flares over targets from above the clouds at night marking the targets for the heavy bombers like the of Bomber Command. The squadrons flew day and night and we worked twelve-hour shifts to keep the radar equipment serviceable. Day use often resulted in dropping bombs on small V1 missile and V2 rocket sites. During this period, Lilian and I kept in touch by correspondence.

Like most service people, there are many significant events one could write about. However, for me a decision had to be made when Lilian invited me to visit her folks in York, while on leave early in 1945. I accepted and we announced our engagement. However, I did outline the hazards of getting involved with a Canadian, and the unknown future but, thankfully, Lilian's parents did not dissuade their only child from embarking on a new adventure. We were married in York in September, getting our license from the York Minster Cathedral. The war being over, I was repatriated to Canada, leaving Southampton on October 22nd on the Queen Elizabeth. We docked at Pier 21 Halifax, at 9 am October 26, my fourth time there.

I received my discharge from the RCAF on December 4 th , 1945, in Calgary. I elected to take University training, choosing architecture for my future career. This necessitated attending the University of Manitoba, the only architectural school in Western Canada at the time. Classes started in March 1946. Lilian arrived in Canada on April 3 rd, 1946, sailing on the hospital ship Letitia and, of course, used Pier 21 in Halifax before boarding a train that transported War Brides across Canada.

She left this train in Winnipeg so we could have a few days together before continuing on to Alberta to stay with my parents. Accommodation could not be found in Winnipeg, so the Department of Veterans Affairs tore down an Air Force hangar to build two-room cabins on the University grounds.

Married Veterans could rent the primitive facilities that were uninsulated, with fibre board interior finish, heated by a Quebec heater and cooking on a two-burner propane camp type unit. Ablutions, one for men and the other for women, were placed in the centre of a group of cabins. Servicewomen who spent time in Nissen huts took this in stride, but it was tough on new brides. However, this accommodation was not available until October of 1946, when Lilian and our son who was born in June, could be with me. We were separated most of the first year of marriage, reflecting the situation for many during the war. As a matter of interest, we Veterans selecting education as our rehabilitation program, had a monthly allowance of \$115.00 for a couple with a child. That had to provide for accommodation rent, food, clothing and school supplies. Hard to believe now how we survived during this period.

Graduation took place in the spring of 1949 and since employment was difficult to obtain in Western Canada, a number of us got employment with the Federal Government as it had started on a large program of construction to overcome the deficits caused by the Great Depression and the war.

Again, accommodation was difficult to obtain but, by October, a small apartment was found that allowed Lilian, our son and daughter, born in June 1949, to travel to Ottawa in October. Our second daughter was born in Ottawa in 1950.



I found the Government work to be interesting and challenging, particularly when I started to design and construct facilities for the Solicitor General of Canada in 1961. I rose to the position of Program M new facilities across Canada, to meet the prison population growth, as well as replacing old colonial-built structures. The Canadian expertise was recognized internationally, which resulted in Canada providing assistance to the Government of Trinidad and Tobago to upgrade their penitentiaries. When I retired from Government Services in December of 1981, I continued to provide consulting services until 1984, including advising the Government of Trinidad and Tobago.

Since retirement, Lilian and I made many trips to Europe and different parts of North America. Of particular interest has been meeting of radar veterans. These RCAF radar veterans only started getting together recently. The first was a Radar Reunion held in Calgary in 1995. I am a member of the Canadian Radar History Project whose purpose is to

publish the 'Radar' story. This has been our goal since the RCAF Official History of WWII has no information about the special group of people recruited to support the RAF when Canada was called to assist Great Britain in 1940.

Besides publishing radar information, we achieved having the 'Canadians on Radar' story displayed this year in the Canadian War Museum in Ottawa. We, RCAF radar mechanics, started from humble beginnings, when radios were only becoming universal, made it through the war years, managed the hardships of raising a family as well as developing a career that contributed to the growth of Canada.

Now, in our eighties, we can relax and write our memoirs that may be of interest to others besides one's family.

Julien Olson

August, 2003