

The Homecoming

Lieutenant Donald Armitage Ross, Canadian Grenadier Guards

Georgina H. Matthews

My brother, Lieutenant Donald Ross, joined the Canadian Grenadier Guards in Montreal in the early years of the Second World War, and after training at Farnham, Quebec, and Camp Borden, Ontario, left for England on 12 September 1942. Almost two years later, on 24 July the Guards, as one unit of the 4th Armoured Brigade, 4th Canadian Armoured Division, embarked for Normandy and by 5 August were deployed in battle.

Meantime, Lieutenant Ross's wife went to live in Montreal West at her parents' home. I too had returned to my family's home, also in Montreal West, after my husband Flight Lieutenant D.J. Matthews, had joined an RAF Squadron in England. Along with many other war wives, Mary Lou and I anxiously followed news of the battles in Normandy, ever dreading delivery of a telegram from the Defence Department.

One morning the ringing of the doorbell summoned my Father, my Mother and me to the front hall where we huddled together as Dad slowly opened the official-looking envelope. We waited almost breathless. Would it be, "We regret to inform you...?"

No, the dreaded news was that Don had been wounded on 11 August. With a deep sigh I whispered, "Thank goodness, now he will be out of the fighting." Mother's eyes brimmed with tears; Dad looked heavenwards in prayerful thanks.

Then began the days and weeks of waiting for news, for some details of Don's wounds, for exchanging with his wife any scraps of information she had gleaned. In mid-September

a letter addressed to Dad in Don's own handwriting was mulled over endlessly. When he said he was "fine" how should that be interpreted? How could he be "fine" if he was being treated with sulpha, penicillin and morphine and acknowledging his left leg was "a bit painful"? What about his shaky handwriting? What about his estimate of four to six months in hospital?

One sorrowful day news came his left leg had been amputated because gangrene had developed. I realized Mother's anguish as she had to accept the brutality of that wound to her adored firstborn.

Weeks went by, letters were sent or were received, friends tried with jocularly to assuage our worries about Don's serious disability. By October's end we began to hope he might be home for Christmas. More waiting, more days of expecting word of his return. At last a notice in the newspaper: a Red Cross ship had docked in Halifax with soldiers invalided home, and the train carrying Montreal-bound men would arrive on December 22. What excitement ensued!

A Christmas tree! We must have a Christmas tree, but where could one be found? This was wartime; the vacant lots usually stacked with freshly cut fir trees were empty. One day on a return trip from downtown Montreal I spied a corner lot with a sign advertising "CHRISTMAS TREES." Still miles from home, without a car to transport a tree, what could I do?

The next day I retraced my journey and purchased one of the few remaining trees. It was no beauty, meagre and scrawny and some what

13 Aug '44

Dear Folks,

I was wounded in the left leg on the 11th and am in a Cdn Hospital in France waiting evacuation to England when I can travel. Am getting excellent treatment morphine penicillin, sulpha - it is a bit painful. This closes the war off for me as it will be 4-6 mos before I get out of hospital. Don't worry I'm fine. I hope all goes well with you - will write when I feel a little more chipper.

Love to all

Don



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misshapen, but it was a spruce. I

fragrant stood waiting for the

next tram home, holding my prize as though I were a standard bearer. The streetcar was almost empty and the conductor was so surprised to see a young woman board his tram carrying a tree he raised no objection as I took a place at the rear of the car.

thousand or so people milling about mounted as the light of the engine pierced the distant darkness, approaching very slowly. Curved steel rails prevented the engine from continuing beyond the safety point as it shuddered to a stop and coughed up a last blast of steam.

The next hurdle was the long walk from the last tram stop. In the snow and darkness of that December night I hoisted the tree to my shoulder, chuckling at the sight I must have presented to passersby, and trudged home with my treasure.

No one who was there that desperately cold midnight of 1944 will ever forget the sight of hundreds of soldiers streaming down the walkways, on stretchers, on crutches, with empty sleeves, with empty trouser legs fastened high, all purposefully making their way towards us. Don was one of those on crutches, one leg missing. We signalled to him excitedly and at last caught his eye, and, in a crush of people and as he grasped his crutches tightly he was embraced first by Mary Lou, then by Dad, then by me. I felt useless trying to clear a way to the exit. Don gently tapped a bystander on the shoulder. "Can we please get through?" Immediately the crowd melted back.

The Armed Forces' train was to arrive at Montreal's Bonaventure Station on 22 December between 11 pm and midnight. Each wife of a returning soldier was sent three passes to allow her and two others entry to the platform. It was a surprise when my sister-in-law phoned to invite me to go with her and my Father to meet Don's train, and my heart overflowed with gratitude at her recognition of what this would mean to me.

A taxi was found and we were on our way to Mary Lou's place where her parents and Mother awaited us with hot beverages. Don and Mary Lou disappeared but startled us all as an alarming thump was heard and a clatter followed that could be nothing but his crutches hitting the floor. We stilled, fearing an injury for him, but soon voices and laughter bubbled from the next room.

The Bonaventure CNR Station was an ancient building with no amenities. Wide double doors along the side opened onto a wooden platform that stretched the full width of the station, looking out on several sets of tracks which ran at right angles to the building, each having cement walkways adjacent. We stood out on the platform as close as permitted to where the train would stop. Excitement among the



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An "O" Group for the personnel of No.1 Protective Troop, Headquarters Squadron, 4th Canadian Armoured Brigade, Vaucelles, France, 7 August 1944. Lieutenant Ross is third from the right with the cigarette.

The following day Mary Lou, along with Don and their 20-month-old daughter came to Mother and Dad's to see all the family. I shall never forget Mary Lou's remark to me as they left. Her two-year vigil for an absent husband had just ended; mine was to continue for almost a year more. She turned to me, "I hope Joe will be home with you next Christmas." Touched by her kindness, I looked aside and bowed my head lest she see the shimmering of my tears.

Years later, in September 1991, Lieutenant Ross, accompanied by one of his sons, returned to the Normandy battlefields. Standing

on Hill 195 which had been the Regiment's objective of 10/11 August 1944, he spoke into a mike and was filmed as he pointed out the railway line, the orchard, and Quesnay Woods where German tanks and guns had been concealed on that fateful day long ago. He talked of his tank being hit and of being catapulted out of it. As it burned he returned to check for a missing crew member. Bob Osbourne, badly injured and helpless, was still inside. Hauling him out, Don hoisted him to his back, and as the tank exploded, he himself was struck by shrapnel. One of his crew crawled forward and dragged him to the cover of a shallow ditch where he lay for nearly four hours before he and Osbourne were picked up.

For the rest of his life, every year on the anniversary of that battle, Bob Osbourne sent a note of gratitude to Don, and, once a pen and ink sketch of their tank Giraffe in flames and a wounded man being carried on another's back away from the inferno.

In June of 1999 I had the rare good fortune to join a study tour of the Normandy battlefields led by Terry Copp. We visited Hill 195, and as we stood on that open hillside hallowed by the blood of those young soldiers of long ago we marvelled at how that ancient land was now liberated and peaceful. The fields of ripening wheat gently undulated and a phantom breeze softly whispered "Lest We Forget".

Lieutenant Donald Ross died on 10 July 1992.

Right: Lieutenant Donald A. Ross

Below: The wreck of a Canadian Grenadier Guards Sherman tank with Quesnay Woods in the background. Photographed in 1946.

