The *AZIZ* family



Remembering my Parents

When you ask a veteran about their war experience, they are only too happy to tell you the adventures they had or the funny things that happened. Digging into the real story can often bring tears and shaking heads. Both my parents, Arthur and Winifred, were Second World War Vets, and yet their stories, experiences, and involvement in the war were completely different.

My father, Arthur, grew up in Toronto, Ontario, and had a job as an instrument designer and maker (This was usually mechanical gauges used to measure pressure.) at the beginning of the war. Art and his buddies followed the news of the war and decided together to enlist in the Canadian Army on October 16, 1941. My father completed his basic training at the Canadian Forces Base Borden, Ontario. This is also where my Father received his training on military tanks at the Canadian Tank School (Base Borden).

In late 1942, my father received orders he was being shipped to England. As a young child, I remember my father entertaining us at mealtimes with stories about his adventures crossing the Atlantic in January 1943. His ship sailed from New York on a very cold day. Soldiers were told to stay below decks. Amid rough seas, seasickness, cramped quarters, and card games, the soldiers rejoiced after three days when they spotted the lights of land, only to be told it was Halifax. This is where their ships joined the Royal Canadian Navy convoy to make the Atlantic crossing. My father described in detail, the role of each ship in the convoy- troop ships, merchant ships, destroyers, and corvettes. While crossing in the convoy, one merchant ship was hit by German U-boats. My father described watching it sink as they sailed by. No ships in the convoy were allowed to stop to give assistance due to the danger of more ships being hit by U- U-boats.

Upon arriving in London, my father was quickly shipped to Aldershot, England where he spent the rest of his time in England repairing the instruments of military tanks. Although he didn't see military action, I can't help but reflect on the commitment of my father and many young men to support the war effort. Sacrifices and lives were “put on hold” in order to defend our democracy.

My mother ‘s stories were completely different. She seldom volunteered information or stories about the war. It was only as an adult, when I took my mother (Win) back to her birthplace - London, England, that I got a good glimpse into the life of a young woman in London during the war. My mother was born in London and received an excellent education. She received many scholarships and in 1937 passed the examinations needed to work for the London County Council. Here, she worked in the Public Health Department in Central London Office adjacent to Big Ben. Women like my mother, were trained to fill the void left by men who were now in the armed forces. She was transferred to Highgate Hospital to process air raid victims. Since the war had a slow beginning, She was transferred once again to Whitehall at Westminster to work with patients suffering from Tuberculosis.

As the war progressed, London became a dangerous place due to the heavy bombing. Nightly

the city was attacked by buzz bombs, rockets fired from Holland, incendiary bombs, and bombers. During air raids, many Londoners would seek shelter, as Win ‘s family did, in shelters built in their backyards. These shelters had concrete floors, cement block walls, and a tin roof covered with sandbags. All houses had blackout curtains on their windows. Cars' headlights were also covered except for a thin cross for the light to shine through. It was during one of these air raids that Win ‘s family house was hit by a bomb. Her family had to move to a flat and during air raids were now required to descend deep into the subway system for the remainder of the night. During the raids, the bombers often followed the Thames River into the heart of London. Therefore, often government buildings were easy targets for bombs. All government employees were trained in firefighting in case an incendiary bomb hit their building. My mother received this training in order to protect Whitehall. She was equipped with a water pump, a scoop, and a bucket of sand. She explained that workers were on teams of 2 or 3 and when their turn arrived they stayed all night in order to protect their building. If a bomb hits its mark on the roof, your team scurried out onto the roof and with a water pumper and sand, to put out the fire. This happened to her a few times. After her death, while I was going through her army papers I found a letter from the Home Guard of London commending her for her service on the night of August 16th/17th, 1941 for protecting Whitehall.

In 1941 Win enlisted in the army and joined the Auxiliary Territorial Service (which was a division of the army). She was sent to Trowbridge in Southern England to receive six months of training as a special wireless operator. Upon completion, she was stationed in the Village of Loughborough in the County of Leicester. The women were housed in Neissan huts. Each operator worked a radio unit listening to a specific frequency (This was usually an ultra-high frequency). They were listening for signals and/or messages that came through rapidly in Morse code. Messages came in blocks of five and often an operator recognized the sender by the touch sound of the Morse code. All the messages were from the military. Similar to the decoding done at Bletchley Park, this decoding was top secret and all operators were required to take the Official Secrets Act. My mother took this oath and well into her late eighties refused to disclose the information they gathered.

My mother later married a Canadian soldier, my father. Her life continued to feel the effects of war life as she became a War Bride and immigrated to Canada to start a new life. This became another difficult period in her life.

Both my parents taught me to have great respect for our soldiers. From listening to and understanding the events that shaped their early adult years, I wonder if I would have had the grit and determination they did. I know every Remembrance Day when I hear the last post played and I see soldiers salute the flag, I always try to swallow the huge lump in my throat and fight tears for the contribution my parents and many other soldiers made to protect our democracy. I wear my Poppy faithfully and respectfully for our country ‘s war heroes.

by ***Gail Aziz***