

## **Pierre's War**

### **Lines that Catch - True stories of Nova Scotia by Heather Stevenson**

As a child, Pierre Allaine escaped unharmed from a war zone while taking part in dangerous activities. He was a typical 13-year old, living with his parents in Bezons, a suburb of Paris, when World War II began. With the German advance, his mother and her two sons fled by bicycle. They joined a mass of people, many carrying their belongings, trying to escape the war machine. It caught up to them when they were attacked by aircraft, which forced Pierre to hide under grape vines. Their only option was to return home.

Back in Bezons, Pierre and his father watched as planes attacked an aircraft factory in Argenteuil. The blast's impact sent them careening against the opposite wall of their room.

“If you can't see your nose 15 feet in front of you,” said his father, “You know you're okay.”

Pierre would spend most of the war away from Bezons, at his grandmother's home, and he'd witness more destruction. His widowed grandmother, alone on her farm, situated just outside of Amboise, in the Loire Valley, saw her first German soldiers as they came through the farmyard gate, headed for the coop, and wrung the necks of her chickens. The officer in charge invited her to the subsequent dinner.

Grandmother's son had already left to join Pierre (brother to Charles) DeGaulle's artillery section in Flanders, which was eventually pushed back all the way to Clermont-Ferrand in Southern France. A German officer ordered them to surrender, had a tank drive over their weapons, and told them “to get out of here.”

With the fall of France, Marechal Phillippe Petain brokered an armistice on 22 June 1940. Charles DeGaulle, now in England, encouraged the French population to resist the occupation, which Pierre and his uncle, who returned to the farm, would do.

In 1942, two butchers came to the farm, asking if they could butcher animals on the premises. Grandmother's building had an easy-to-clean cement floor which would conceal their illegal activities. This was Pierre's initiation into the resistance, although he found the butchering of animals distasteful at first. Later, he helped and his involvement increased when he took the meat to a cave under a church, in the nearby historical city of Amboise.

Going by train to visit his parents, Pierre concealed eggs, butter, and some meat, in a wooden suitcase. Parisians, being rationed, had little access to extra food, but sometimes, Pierre's produce was converted to other items on the Black Market.

By the middle of 1943, there was a well-established resistance along the Loire Valley which maintained escape routes for Allied servicemen. Information, passed along using secret passwords and signals, told members where they were needed.

Pierre would go to the appointed place, at the river's edge, where Allies waited. As he maneuvered his boat, with a long pole, to cross the river, his passengers lay in the boat's bottom. Pierre never conversed with them for it was better not to know names. Someone always waited, at the other side, to smuggle the human cargo into Free France.

Transporting illegal people and goods were dangerous pursuits, but just riding a train could be risky. Amboise, a railway hub, became a favourite target for Allied aircraft. The rail line was important, linking up with Spain, in the south, where goods, from places like Argentina, were loaded. These goods moved north to Paris, then east to Germany.

The first air raid on the line, carried out by Mosquito aircraft, came in mid-1941. Continuous raids took place over the next three years as the Germans organized civilian work details to clean up the messes so the trains would run again.

Mosquitoes weren't the only aircraft Pierre would see. Spitfires dove at freight trains, Liberators and Marauders flew as low as the treetops. All provided entertainment to the teenager.

"We would take bets," says Pierre.

The entertainment ceased when, two years later, B-17 bombers made an appearance, destroying farms and houses along with their targets.

With over 200 air raids, Pierre became adept at recognizing aircraft by their sounds, yet within a week of D-Day, he heard a noise he didn't recognize. In formation, large planes lowered themselves, dropped their bombs, and took out the bridge. He listened to the BBC that night, while someone acted as lookout, and learned the bombers were Lancasters.

During one of the last air raids, an Allied plane crashed 800 metres from the farm. The crew had time to parachute, but most were shot as they came down. When the resistance found two unharmed airmen, not much older than Pierre, his uncle sheltered them in a cave. The resistance network had a breach, collaborators reported them to the Gestapo and the airmen were shot.

When the Allies liberated much of France, Pierre's uncle joined his former artillery unit which was sent to clear up pockets of the enemy along the Atlantic coast.

By 1946, Pierre had been conscripted and was doing occupation duty in Germany.

Pierre Allaine doesn't try to understand why such events happen, as he focuses on the positive accomplishments made in medicine and freedom.

"I've lived a beautiful life," he says.

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