

Letters from Somewhere (Part Two)

Lines that Catch – true stories of Nova Scotia

by Heather Stevenson

(A special thank-you goes to Ellen Pettipas for allowing the use of her father's World War Two letters and photographs.)

A few days before Christmas, the North Nova Scotia Highlanders were back on the winter line relieving the Regina Rifles. During these cold, wet days, A Company and Larry Graham's D Company lingered on the banks of the River Waal. The enemy was intent on blowing the bridge; the Allies intent on saving it. Branches, logs, anything could have a mine attached, but if any got through, a net was strung across the river 50 yards downstream.

Larry visited the ruins of a village scattered with Allied and German equipment and, among the loot he saw a case of German rifle ammunition, the cartridges made of hardwood painted red. Further on, he reached an area with abandoned German trenches, but he dug his own farther back on the lieutenant's orders. At night, he lay in the cemetery-like hole as shells thundered, whistled, whined, and moaned from both sides. By morning, when it had become a rumbling far ahead, Larry and his fellow Novies, rose to see the abandoned German trenches blasted to pieces.

Somewhere in Holland - Dec. 21st, 1944

Dear Jean,

I hope that my note will find you in perfect health and having a real good time.

I received your cigarettes last night. Was I ever pleased to get them. They were also my favourite kind too.

Well we are back at it again, but all getting along good. But I'll not say anything about our quarters.

It is almost supertime now. So I must sneak quietly with my old mess tins and see what's there besides Bully Beef and hard-tack. What would I give to sit down to a nice table at home, and a big steaming supper on it.

When it is over get ready for a dance, a nice blue suit, a pair of nice low shoes. What a day that will be.

What bothers me is if I'll be here when that day comes.

I got some Christmas cards here. I know it is too late, but I am sending them anyway. They will be a souvenir of this awful place.

I have a few letters to write tonight and my hand is aching just like a bad tooth.

So I hope you will excuse my short note for this time. I'll be looking forward to receiving a letter from you in the meantime.

I must thank you again for the cigarettes and for your kindness.

Give my best regards to the family and I hope you all had a Merry Christmas and will have a very Happy New Year.

Sending you all my love, Larry

Steak & kidney pie

Steak and kidney pie, described by troops as a blob encased in a doughy crust which was difficult to eat when heated and not edible when cold; meat and vegetable stew; the famous Bully Beef; and hard-tack biscuits—these were the meals Larry ate at the front.

Rations, precooked, were often eaten cold; the Novies could give away their location by having a fire. Command posts had primus stoves, but the regular soldiers were more inventive, crafting stoves from hard-tack tins. The bottom halves, filled with petrol-soaked sand, were lit while the top halves, filled with water, sat over the flames. Open ration cans fit nicely in the boiling water. Food was never far from Larry's thoughts.

Christmas approached and the war dragged along. On Christmas Eve, both sides sang carols and the next day the front was silent as snow flurries came and went.

Somewhere in Holland - January 4th, 1945

Dear Jean,

I received your most welcomed letter last night. Also the wonderful Xmas card from your father and mother. I was going to write them a letter but I wished you would tell them I received it, and that I was very pleased to get it and I thank them very much.

It was Christmas night that I received your second last letter, and you will never know how pleased I was to get a letter from you that night. It seemed that God intended that I should get it for it seemed more like Christmas after I read it.

I was also very pleased to find out that you feel the way you do about me, Jean. And when I get home and we see more of each other, I hope you will still feel the same way...

Every time I do something, no matter where I am, I think of those who love me. And it certainly helps me from disappointing them. I don't intend to come home a hero, but I do want to come home, and say, "Well I did my share."

I must tell you all about my Xmas dinner. Well, we had to walk back four or five miles to a big building where we had our dinner.

At first when we got there we had all the beer we wanted. Then we marched into the dining hall with the bag pipes. We sat down and the OC of the company said grace. On our plate was chicken and turkey, green peas, and all the other things to fix it up and a big glass of rum punch. There was cake, cookies, chocolate bars, oranges, creams, and apples.

While we ate there was a young fellow from Holland played the piano. He played all the Christmas songs.

And Tex Cochrane is here in the company now. He is a lieutenant. He sang "My Old Canadian Home" and a song that the sergeant and himself made up of a very successful fighting patrol. Was it ever good.

All around, we had a very good Christmas. When we got back we sang songs and then it ended up by talking of where we would be, and what we would be doing next year.

When the mail came in, your letter was there. So I'll say I had a very Merry Xmas and I hope you had a good one too.

We are busy by spells. And the rest of the time we are waiting for things to start.

I want to thank you for all you are doing for me, and I am looking every day for a letter from you. I am always overjoyed to get a letter and all those little things are very interesting.

Here we hardly hear a radio and never hear any singing, unless you do it yourself. Most of the time, one can't even talk loud.

It will not be long now before I'll have all the things that I am missing. Well it is time for me to get busy again and I'll have to close for now. Please give the family my best regards and I wish you all the best of everything.

Sending you all my Love, Larry

The war was to continue until May, 1945 and Larry would be wounded again, spending the last days of the conflict recovering in a convalescent depot.

elder-zone.com is an online magazine for and about seniors, their families & friends

©2011 Lines that Catch by Heather Stevenson

