

pCHAPTER ONE

Coming of Age in Copper Cliff

We experience a delivery from the Canadian Telegram Service, that which all mothers dread, “We painfully regret to inform you”... and are heartened to life in 1941 within a typical Canadian community; a generation of sons sent once again into harm’s way and the grim reality of war. We fracture time, step back, and focus on Sydney Percival Smith as he begins to tell his story; of his coming of age in Copper Cliff, Ontario and of his family. We meet twelve of Syd’s high school friends and establish “The Brotherhood of Thirteen” whose immediate future is told in the gathering storm and the inevitability of Churchill’s declaration of war. The call to the Commonwealth divides and disperses the brotherhood into service as we follow Syd and three of his closest buddies, together, determined to become aircrew. We button up by illuminating the courage and character of the British people and the Dominions who choose to stand.

CHAPTER TWO

Winning our Wings

Their determination pays off and Syd, Mike, Bill and Don make aircrew. Returning home to await their call up orders Don is the first to go. Syd joins him . . . now they are two. We follow them to the Toronto Manning Depot as they undergo training under the British Commonwealth Air Training Plan (BCATP) and we are brought to understand the worldly importance of Canada’s role as the “Aerodrome of Democracy.” A deeper bonding and heightened reality comes with Syd and Don “winning their wings.” and their graduation into a world of yet more rigorous training in actual aircraft. Early morning December 7, 1941 brings news of the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor; America is awoken. On the Canadian home front a telegram imparts a grim reminder of the stakes with the first loss of the brotherhood, Carleton Lane. We leave with Syd and Don’s heartfelt good-bye to their parents as they board the train to Halifax . . . destined for duty overseas.

CHAPTER THREE

This England

On board with 1,000 Canadian airmen Syd and Don convoy across the Atlantic to Mother England slicing through the German U-boat wolf packs to Scotland and down by rail to Bournemouth. We savor a bit of pub life as Syd, Don and Bill Lane (stationed nearby) reunite over a pint. We discover the heart of London along with Syd as he inherits a greater awareness of life in embattled Britain while visiting family. Then, abruptly, our duo becomes one. . . Syd falls in line and is separated from Don as he is called to Bomber Command's Ossington Airfield and into operational training. We now familiarize ourselves with certain types of RAF bomber aircraft and in particular those Syd will pilot on actual missions. Of course any examination of Bomber Command would not be complete without discussing Arthur Harris, Air Officer Commander-in-Chief of Bomber Command and his dream of a decisive victory through airpower.

CHAPTER FOUR

Flights to the Reich | Happy Valley

Syd's turn comes sooner than he thought and he's briefed on his first mission to Düsseldorf just as the tragic news of the Canadian disaster at Dieppe casts a shadow over the Allied cause. Lessons learned through Canada's sacrificial lambs –nearly 1,000 killed and 2,500 taken prisoner– would be applied to the eventuality of D-Day. Syd flies a harried but successful 1st mission over the industrial Ruhr, "Happy Valley," returning unscathed to the customary RAF reward of bacon and eggs. On his next mission to Essen targeting the Krupp Steel Works, Syd is coned in his Hampden and must execute a death defying dive maneuver that proves more traumatizing than anything yet, or perhaps to come. We breathe easier as Syd safely returns to RAF Station Ossington –but to a toll exacted– thirty-nine crews of three hundred and sixty-nine do not return, over twice the acceptable amount. RAF statistics and the law of diminishing returns are whispering to us.

CHAPTER FIVE

The "Whirlwind" Tours

Newly posted to East Wretham, a satellite airfield of Mildenhall, Syd becomes one with his new mount, the Vickers Wellington or "Wimpy" pet named after Popeye's hamburger munching side kick. Syd then crews up and we meet wireless air gunner Larry

McCosham, navigator Nicholas, bomb aimer Roy Tolmie and tail gunner Bob DeVine. Over the fall and early winter of '42 the crew congeals nicely and we fly as observers on ten relatively uneventful missions targeting Cologne, Bremen, Stuttgart, Frankfurt, Munich and Mannheim along with the occasional mine laying or “gardening” excursions over the Bay of Biscay. We are privy to the hard line, no nonsense inner workings of an RAF Station while news of the Nazi defeat at Stalingrad in the winter of '43 brings new hope and denotes the beginning of the end for the Third Reich. Again, however –only the beginning– as we try not to notice the empty seats at the breakfast table.

CHAPTER SIX

“Abracadabra”

Against all odds our crew has slipped through six weeks of combat without a scratch. Suddenly, a personal blow, James Watkinson, a wireless air gunner from another 115 Squadron crew fails to return and is the second to fall of the “Brotherhood of Thirteen.” Nicholas is re-assigned and off with another crew in need of a navigator and ominously, does not return. Syd promptly enlists navigator Jock Reid and straight away their 14th mission is a go; the target for tonight: Turin and the push to get Italy out of the war. Enroute, they’re sliced up by a German night-fighter. Losing altitude fast, Syd makes the call and the crew codeword crackles over the intercom, “Abracadabra!” The crew bails – pilot last– and Syd’s exit from the doomed Wimpy is further complicated making an already narrow escape next to unbelievable. Tumbling out with barely enough altitude to catch any air at all, Syd hits the earth hard and is knocked out cold.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Angels in Adversity

Syd finally regains consciousness. A distant bell gives him direction and marks what little time he has to find refuge. We slog across ploughed fields of what must be France towards the sound and hope of sanctuary. As the cover of darkness lifts, Syd slips inside a nearby haystack just outside a farmhouse. The next morning Syd chooses to reveal himself and with great fortune our farmer is sympathetic and welcomes him into his home. He is then brought to Madame de Serbonne, a prominent, well-respected figure in

the community who calls her daughter, Catherine, from Paris. Amazingly, we find Syd has fallen into the arms of angels of the French Resistance, who bravely and beautifully orchestrate a plan to spirit Syd through Paris under the noses of the Gestapo, out of occupied France via the Comète Line, over the Pyrenees on foot, down through Spain, to Gibraltar, and eventually home to Mother England.

CHAPTER EIGHT

The Comète Line

Sydney, two other intentionally unidentified evaders and a trio of teenage girls fill a train compartment to discourage contact with other passengers and head to St. Jean de Luz by way of Bordeaux. We trek over the Pyrenees under cover of night and down into San Sebastian on the Atlantic coast of Spain. We ride to Madrid by British Embassy limousine and further south to Seville, over to Gibraltar, out across the Atlantic and double back to England under the protection of an Allied convoy. Landing in Scotland, incredibly, Jock Reid walks off a gangplank alongside Syd having evaded as well. Back to base in Bournemouth, Syd has returned from the dead and is interrogated by RAF brass on his evasion. In London Syd, Don and Bill joyfully reunite all too briefly as they're soon called to duty –and some to fate– this time, it's Don who fails to return. Granted thirty days leave a more pensive and much older Sydney boards the QE I for home.

CHAPTER NINE

The Reluctant Hero

Returning to a hero's fanfare and his family in Copper Cliff, Syd is understandably perplexed as he knows full well that the real heroes are not coming home . . . or still over there. Painfully underscoring Syd's guilt is the confirmation of Don Plaunt's death by the International Red Cross and Syd witnesses the emotional and almost physical destruction of the Plaunt family. Just a few weeks later comes news of Bill Lane being killed in action, his Spitfire shot out of the skies over Essen. Any celebration of Syd's homecoming is almost an affront to the families he helps to console as well as premature as he is ordered back overseas to Bournemouth. There, refused any assignment to fly over Europe –should he be captured with what he knows– Syd resigns himself to the

training of new pilots and to serving Canada's "Aerodrome of Democracy." As the Americans arrive in England en-masse, Sydney packs for the voyage home.

CHAPTER TEN

Victory ...and Loss

As one of a limited few combat experienced flight instructors Syd invests himself in Canada's world renowned BCATP. Personal losses mount as Mike Kennedy, the Depew's, both Doug and Neil and Albert Sydney Smith-McFeetors are killed in action. With Syd's brotherhood of thirteen further diminished, anger and grief battle for the high ground. Yet, into the gloom comes a bright moment, Syd meets Sheila Grannary. D-Day June 6, 1944, Operation Overlord is launched as are the V1 and the V2 rockets against London. Then comes Dresden along with the controversy. Hiroshima and Nagasaki usher in the Atomic Age as newsreels un-spool the horrors of Nazi Germany's "Final Solution." Discharged from the RAF in April 1945, civilian life brings relative normalcy as we share in the joy of Syd and Sheila's nuptials. Family life "booms" with seven children throughout the 50's and 60's as Syd plies his trade in Dentistry in Northern and Southern Ontario.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Where Time Stands Still

Syd catches up with each of his crew from the ill-fated 14th mission and learns their stories . . . on a more personal level he learns the truth of Don Plaunt's death. Syd finds quiet consolation in community involvement, faith and family. The years that follow blend achievements and the certainty of life's sorrows as Sheila, dear wife, mother and great grandmother passes. Inevitably Syd slows. Now with time, reflection and a son's curiosity piqued, the silence begins to lift. Determined to get the whole story David's research uncovers a letter dated August 18th 1946. Written by Madame Serbonnes with concern to Syd's welfare, it poignantly tells of a peoples plight and the promise of Canada's boundless natural, economical and spiritual resources and –with startling providence– of what Canada is today. As if by divinity, this beautiful letter of great consequence has David find Syd's angel of the resistance alive and well in Paris and ultimately facilitates our final chapter, "Reunion".

CHAPTER TWELVE

Reunion

Our reunion envoy arrives in Paris, June 10, 2003. Sydney, his son David, daughter Stephanie and granddaughter Adrienne gather at their hotel just a short walk from Catherine's apartment where she originally hid Syd and fellow evaders. Initially a bundle of nerves, a heartwarming embrace on Catherine's threshold melts away Syd's apprehension. It's been 61 years. The Janot and Smith families finally meet in person and caravan south to the same family chateau where Syd found himself in '42. There, it's a feast of family, newfound friends and of course, food. Syd and Catherine are celebrated, and sometimes ceremoniously by an entire village. At the evening dinner table, the letter David thought all were aware of comes as a genuine surprise and is read aloud by Monsieur Janot. As tears well . . . their dearly departed grandmother's wish has come true.

. . . This now all seems neither here nor there. France tries to heal itself after some cruel times that have left her beaten down and spiritless. We hope that you wish to see us again and that we will have the pleasure to receive you and your loved ones in an atmosphere which we will do our utmost to make pleasant for you. We have always admired Canada from afar, a country full of spiritual and economic resources which helped us out so much in the war and which will certainly remain a center of reconstruction in the world. Let us know what is happening with you and believe in our loyal affection.

~Madame de Serbonnes

All good things must come to an end. This time –under quite different circumstances– Syd and Catherine are able to share an unhurried and heartfelt good-bye. Two families having bonded are now friends for life and by the grace of God, Sydney Percival Smith was given the extraordinary opportunity to properly thank his angel. In parting . . . Syd just knows the dear friends lost from the brotherhood of his youth had found angels too.