

INTRODUCTION

Growing up, I loved listening to my mother as she told stories about her life. In 1997, I recorded her as she spoke about family, growing up, and her time in the Canadian Navy during WWII. For me, that is still a wonderful as well as sad moment in time because I knew that one day she would no longer be able to recall those stories; the memory of those stories, for her, would no longer exist. Alzheimer's would ultimately steal them, and then it would be my turn to remind her of her story. Stories that I would always begin with, "Your name is June ..."

Years later, I started to write my mother's story, and initially I thought that its main focus would be about her time in the Canadian Navy. In 1944, she had joined the Women's Royal Canadian Naval Service, which was more commonly referred to as WRCNS or Wrens (adopted from the British Women's Royal Naval Service who were known as Wrens or Jenny Wrens), and she was stationed in Greenock, Scotland. She was one of the 500 WRCNS stationed in Great Britain.

As information was gathered and her storyline developed, I began to think about a dear friend of mine who had lived in Kreuzberg, Germany as well as the Zehlendorf and Berlin areas, before and during the war years. Over our many years of friendship, she also shared her stories about her childhood, growing up in the Kinderheim and working as a nanny for a diplomat, as well as training to be a nurse. In her later years, we would look through her personal photo and postcard albums. Every time we turned the selected album pages, the pictures and postcards provided a backdrop to her stories

and subtly reflected the increasing Nazi influence. Eventually, these became my go-to starting points for more research on specific topics that she had spoken about from that period.

Both she and my mother were born in 1922, within six weeks of each other. Their childhood histories had similarities, and they both became strong, independent women. Those connections helped me to decide that both of their stories should be told.

The storyline would eventually expand to include two more family members. My father had enlisted in the Royal Canadian Air Force (RCAF) and had been stationed in Great Britain, as well as North Africa and Italy in WWII. Plus, my uncle had enlisted with the Hastings and Prince Edward Regiment (also known as the Hasty Ps), which was part of the 1st Canadian Infantry Division. He had been stationed in Great Britain, fought in Sicily, Italy, as well as the Netherlands. I realized that their stories would also be worth researching and writing about.

Interviews with family members, who recalled what they had been told about my parents and uncle during the war, or were generous in retelling their own WWII recollections, offered additional information and insights on the war through their remembrances.

Researching is interesting. Finding factual information, confirming it through a variety of sources, finding surprising tidbits that confirm or expand, and then needing to confirm that expanded information using other sources, is challenging and rewarding. Various websites, books, reference materials, archival manuscripts, and museum exhibitions all helped to provide a historical timeline.

One of the areas I had begun to research took an unexpected twist. On a trip to Bermuda, my husband and I met a Bermudian couple who told me about the hotel that became “Bletchley in the Tropics” during WWII. Coincidentally, at that time, I was interested in finding out if my mother might have actually been a decoder.

Like many others, she had stated on her WRCNS’s application her interest in becoming a messenger or decoder. I remembered her speaking of a trip to New York City with three other Wrens just before shipping out to Scotland. My initial research indicated that Wrens did go to New York City for training on deciphering, and some also worked in New York City as well as Washington.

I thought that might be the direction her story would take. Although I eventually realized it’s unlikely to have happened, it seemed fitting to embellish the idea a little, knowing my mom would have loved it. Once I learned about the connection between Room 3603 in Rockefeller Center and Bermuda, and did more research on the Bermuda Censorettes, I created a character who was a decoder and called her Charlien in my mom’s memory, which was her middle name.

Lincoln, Cardie, and Harry are three more individuals I created to add to the backdrop of that era, a time deeply and profoundly experienced by my family. I was learning so much about U-boats along the Eastern coast of Canada and convoys crossing the Atlantic, the Murmansk Run, or crossing the Atlantic’s Black Pit, that I wanted others to have the same opportunity to learn about the men and women—on both sides—who had lived, fought, and died in that specific area.

To sum up, my parents, uncle, friend, and relatives provided actual places, dates, and events for the storyline, and elements of their stories are true. However, much of this story comes from my imagination coupled with hours of research over many years to add perspective to their lives at that time. The same can be said for the additional characters, despite factual elements of their stories.

I hope you enjoy reading their stories.