

Chapter One

September to Overseas 1943

I remember very well when Britain declared war on Germany. It was Labour Day week-end 1939, and I was just 16 years old. The German army had gone into Poland but we had all been expecting it for a long time, as Hitler had been making a lot of speeches and was being very rough on the Jewish people. I can remember the day very clearly.

My two brothers, my sister Betty, my cousin Roy, Murial Davis (Jean Skelhorne) and I were sitting at the bottom of our basement stairs. We had just moved back to Burnaby from Surrey, where my father had twenty acres, and were talking about the war. England had just declared war with Germany. What might it mean to us? We knew Canada would be in it very soon, as we belonged to the British Commonwealth. I said, "I'm going to join up as soon as I'm old enough." Murial could not believe that I wanted to do this, but that is exactly what I did.

In April 1941, when I was seventeen, I joined the Dominion Provincial Youth Training Program. This was for the Air Force. I registered at the old Fairbanks Morse Building in Vancouver, at the end of the old

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Cambie Street Bridge, to learn to be an aircraft mechanic. My mother was very displeased that I had quit school three quarters of the way through grade eleven and was a little nervous about telling my father that I had done this. My father had always been very strict, insisting that we get at least grade twelve and qualify for the University Entrance program. So when he found out he was very angry at me.

I actually joined up in September 1941, just after my eighteenth birthday. I was very proud of being in the Royal Canadian Air Force and being in uniform. I was first sent to the Toronto Manning Depot where the Royal Canadian Air Force (RCAF) had taken over the Canadian National Exhibition buildings.

ROYAL CANADIAN AIR FORCE				
	Name	PORTER Robert Edward	R. 1 3 3 0 7 4	
	Rank	AC.2	R.C.A.F.	
	Age	18	Height	5'3 1/2"
	Weight	151	Hair	Brown
	Eyes	Hazel	Hair on face	Med.
	Marks, scars, etc.	Nil		
	<i>R. E. Porter</i> (Signature of holder)			<i>[Signature]</i> (Signature of issuer)
	Place	Vancouver Recruiting Centre	Date	September 26, 1941
	Card serial number		68 1350	

Fig.1a My ID issued 1941

These were all cleaned out and we were quartered in what was called the "Cattle Stalls." First, we were issued our uniform which came in just three sizes: large, medium or small. Then came the hair cut. I had long curly hair but it did not last long. I think I got my crew cut about the second day I was there. I then

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found out about the "Short Arm Inspection," often done with female staff and whatever modesty I had was soon lost.

Myself

Fred



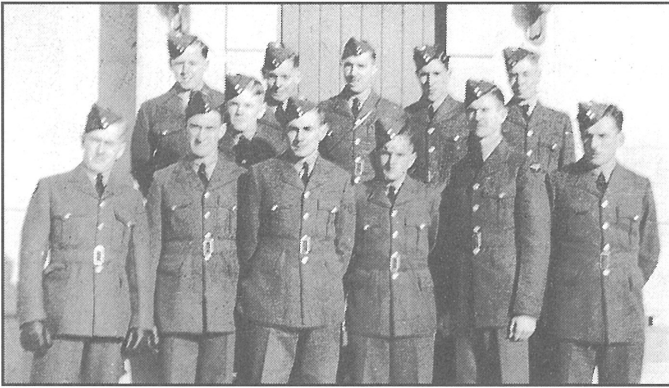
Fig.1b My brother Fred and me in Toronto

Finally, we all had to get our shots some of which really made your arm swell up. A lot of the guys passed out when they were having them. In many cases, the bigger they were the more likely they passed out. September 1941 was a really cold time in Toronto. We almost froze as we did our basic training on the parade square, with the wind blowing

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off Lake Ontario. During the month we were at the Toronto Manning Depot doing our basic training I learned not to volunteer for anything. For example, the base headquarters called out on the loudspeakers for anyone that liked to drive a car. I was one of the first to step up and found myself in the motor pool, washing vehicles all day!

Myself



*Fig.1c Graduation at St.Thomas
Aero-Engine Mechanic*

We finally left Toronto in November to move up the training ladder, first, to southern Ontario to the St-Thomas Aero-Engine Mechanics School. After graduating in March 1942 we were posted to McLeod Alberta #7S Flying Training School. I was not too happy there, as I wanted to go overseas, not spend my war years fixing training aircraft on the prairies. I was at McLeod for about eight months, when one

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day, walking up to the canteen I ran into a buddy of mine. I asked him, "Where are you going?" He replied, "Up to headquarters to re-muster as air-crew."

I thought that sounded great! I asked, "Do you think they will accept me?" He responded, "Lots of others have done it." But one needed grade twelve to get into aircrew and I had quit school in the Spring of grade eleven.



Fig.1d Anson Aircraft

However, I had finished my grade eleven maths and was working on my grade twelve maths by correspondence. Since mathematics was one of the main requirements for aircrew. I decided to go with him. The next week, they called us for an interview, to write all the tests and have our medical for aircrew. As a result, the buddy that I went up with didn't pass but I did! Probably because I was well qualified in mathematics. My report noted I was, "good average material. Should do well as a Pilot." I was always very lucky

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and I guess I answered the questions right. Unfortunately it gave my mother a little more to worry about.

A couple of weeks later I was off to Edmonton with those who had passed the flying training. Here I passed a winter I will never forget.



*Fig.e Sitting on a
Northrop Delta*

With a temperature of forty below even with our great coats on, we felt as if we were naked. For the next five months, we attended the Initial Training School which provided general training for all aircrew. At the end of this, we were selected to be either a pilot (first choice), navigator, bomb Aimers, wireless air gunner or air gunner. I lost out on being a pilot, as I had some slight colour blindness, but I was very happy with becoming a Bomb Aimer. A Bomb Aimer did a bit of everything. Besides being in control of the bombing, when over the target, he was also the Gunner in the front turret. In addition, he helped the Navigator with the radar and used the sextant to "shoot" stars and calculate the aircraft's position. In a case of emergency he could also take over the controls and fly the plane home.

From Edmonton, we went to No. 2 Bombing and Gunnery School in Mossbank, Saskatchewan, for bombing and gunnery training. Unfortunately, we felt that Mossbank was not only the end of the railway but the end of the world! It was the most desolate

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place I had ever seen. It seemed that all the girls over 16 years old had been sent to live with their grandmother in some place more isolated than Mossbank. Not many mothers were keen on their daughters going out with us aircrew because we were very care-free and were going overseas in the next few months. I was never a church-going person but I always went to church on the first Sunday I arrived in a new town. You could almost hear the mothers say: "Look at that nice boy over there." It worked every time. The big excitement was going to Moose Jaw for the week-end. It was a lively town and always had something going on.

Finally, at the end of June, 1943, we were posted to No. 7 Air Observers School (AOS) at Portage La Prairie, Manitoba. After five weeks of navigation training, our basic flying training on the "Link Trainer" and aircrew training, we graduated and received our wings.

We were all posted from there, some to become Instructors and they seemed very happy, although I would have hated it. Others were posted to Coastal Command, which seemed a very safe but boring job, again not for me. I got what I wanted I was posted overseas. A few were made officers and the rest, like myself, became sergeants. We were given three weeks leave, a railway ticket to Vancouver, and a one way ticket to Halifax. We were sure proud of ourselves, with our sergeant's stripes and wings. I made a last trip to Vancouver to visit my mother in the hospital. I couldn't understand why she was crying as I said goodbye. At that time we were young, flying and go-

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ing overseas. We were on top of the world and it was a very exciting time!

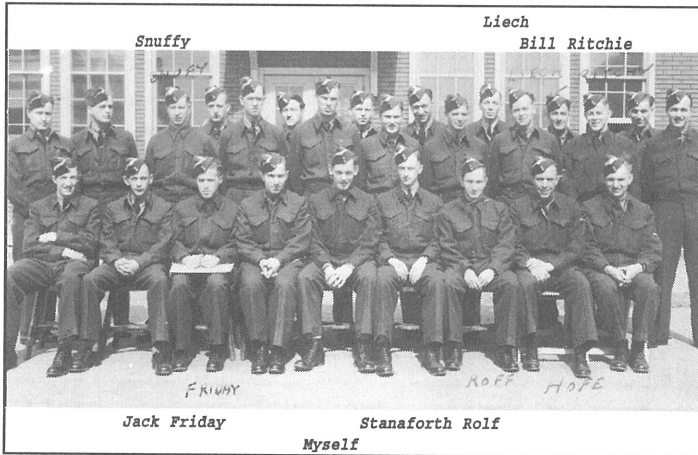


Fig.1f Graduation from Portage la Prairie A.O.S.

But I can see now, mothers do not look at it the same way. I always told her: "Only the good die young and I'm not the best boy in town." On the way to Halifax I stopped off at Toronto to visit my girl friend, Bunny, whom I had met in 1941 when I was there. I was supposed to stay just a day and a half, but it ended up being four or five days. As a result, I was a few days late getting to Halifax but the ship hadn't left yet, so I didn't get into deep trouble. Although the Air Force was a little displeased, there wasn't much they could do because they were very short of aircrew at this time. We were very naive at that young age. We thought they were making the squadrons bigger, but they were actually losing a lot of aircraft and needed more aircrew to replace them.

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We left for England on August 27th on the Queen Mary with 22,000 of us on board. Everybody was sleeping all over the place and the dining room never closed. However we only had two meals a day, that was it. There was always a line-up waiting to eat. The food wasn't very good, but they were feeding a lot of men and I guess they couldn't do much better. I knew there would not be any liquor on the way over and we were not supposed to take anything to drink on the ship. A lot of the fellows did not drink and I knew who they were so I filled their water bottles full of Rye Whiskey. I never forgot where the bottles were.

The ocean was as smooth as glass, all the way over. We had some escort ships the first day out but after that we were on our own, crossing to Greenoch, Scotland in five days. The other ships that went in the convoy took ten days, some of them running into submarines and many were torpedoed. The German Navy's submarine force was very strong at that time but we never saw any. The Queen Mary sailed too fast, so they never had a problem. She sailed continually back and forth through the war either from Halifax with Canadian servicemen or from New York with Americans. A few years after the war it was sold and parked in Long Beach, California where they made her into a tourist attraction with a fancy restaurant. Many servicemen from all over the world have fond memories of her.