



A VETERAN'S STORY

Seventy years after returning home, Robert Grant shares his most memorable experiences of the Second World War.

By Ashley Miller



FOR CORNER BROOK WAR VETERAN ROBERT GRANT,

the Second World War was a time of near misses, tragic losses and, most certainly, miracles. And at nearly 97 years of age, he remembers it all like it happened yesterday.

“There’s days and days I wonder how we ever did it,” says Robert, reminiscing about his six-year stint overseas – fighting his way from England to North Africa to Italy as part of the 57th Newfoundland Heavy Regiment.

Robert was born in St. John’s in 1919, and moved to Corner Brook with his family when he was a teenager. He was 20 years old and working as a hand in The Company Store on West Street, owned by Bowaters and managed by Robert’s father, when Newfoundland governor Sir Humphrey

Walwyn issued the proclamation calling for volunteers to enlist in the war effort in February 1940. The response was swift; more than 400 individuals signed up for the first draft in St. John’s, leaving in April 1940. Robert was one of 212 to join the second draft, which consisted of individuals from central and western Newfoundland. And many more would follow.

“Everybody was joining up and I was too cowardly to stay home,” says Robert, somewhat ironically. “So I joined in the flock.”

Left: Robert Grant, Scotland, 1941

Above: Robert Grant (back row, far right) while stationed in Campobasso, Italy in 1944



Robert Grant (right) and his brother, Doug, pose for a photo while in Scotland during WWII. Doug, a member of the Royal Air Force, was shot down and killed over France in 1943.

He left home for Montreal on May 12, 1940 – Mother’s Day, he recalls. From Montreal, the second draft boarded the passenger liner *Duchess of Richmond* for Liverpool, England.

“We had a lovely trip over. The stewards there woke you up every morning with a cup of tea and a biscuit. All the tables had white tablecloths, and dinnertime you’d have two choices of meals...whatever you wanted,” says Robert. The experience would stand in stark contrast to what awaited them across the pond. Once in Liverpool, they boarded a train headed south. During the ride, simple bowls of soup and crusty bread were served to the men – but any grumbling over the fare was quickly stifled.

Robert recalls, “This little Englishman got up and said, ‘now look here caca’ – that’s an expression they use over there – ‘you’re in England now and there’s a war on. You can eat that or you can leave it, but,’ he said, ‘you won’t get nothing else until you gets down to your barracks tonight.’”

INTO AFRICA

Robert says the regiment spent a relatively uneventful first year guarding England’s coast from possible German invasion before being sent to Scotland to train for the field regiment.

The soldiers got to know the people of Lesmahagow, one of the Scottish villages where they were billeted, and Robert says it began to feel like a second home. While there, Robert met a Scottish woman, Anne Wardrop – but their budding romance was cut short when he shipped out, destined for the battlefields of North Africa.

“Lesmahagow was a little village like Corner Brook...when we marched down the main street to get to the train station the place was lined with people. The stores were all closed up and everything else, to see us off,” says Robert. “It was just like leaving home.”

In February 1943, the regiment – now called the 166th Newfoundland Field Regiment – arrived in North Africa, where Robert was part of a gun crew. It was risky business and,

Robert feels, the first time since being overseas that he was in real danger. In one incident, Robert believes the Lord Himself intervened to spare his life.

“I had one of my fellas on the gun and he was a nervous wreck. He was up all night and I was up trying to comfort him. So the next day we moved into action and I was so beat out I said to my second-in-command, ‘I’m going to have a rest now.’ So I took my greatcoat and folded it up as a pillow, went into my tent and lay down and went off to sleep. And all of a sudden, my father was standing at the doorway. Now in my dream the tent – a pup tent – was a big tent, and he was standing up holding the post. I said, ‘Dad what are you doing here?’ He said, ‘Nevermind what I’m doing here, it’s time you got out of that, you’re in danger,’” says Robert. “All of a sudden I woke up, and the pup tent was there – and no father. What a scare, so I got out of the tent and went out in the gun pit.” Robert says as he rejoined his comrades and told them of his chilling dream, the Germans started firing. While fires burned and shrapnel flew over the men’s heads, they scrambled to guess where successive shells would land.

Later that night, Robert returned to the pup tent to retrieve his greatcoat. Unfolding it, a piece of steel – shrapnel from the German’s firing – fell to the ground. It had pierced his coat, which he’d earlier used for a pillow, from front to back.

“If my father didn’t come wake me up I would have been there, I would have been dead,” says Robert. “So the Lord was with me.” He tucked the shrapnel into his pocket and carried it with him, through battle after battle. (He still had it up until a decade ago

when it went missing, much to Robert’s chagrin.)

By the battle’s end, 24 Newfoundlanders had lost their lives in North Africa, according to the Newfoundland and Labrador Heritage website. But their duty was far from over.

ONWARD TO ITALY

In the fall of 1943, Robert and his comrades were on the move again, headed for Italy. They arrived on Italy’s south coast and made their way northwards, engaging the Germans in numerous battles, says Robert.

In the town of Cassino, he recalls the Germans were perched atop a mountain firing at the Allied forces below. Robert was manning a gun at the base of the mountain and as shells rained down around him, he witnessed one of his comrades getting struck.

“So I got my first aid kit and went over and sure enough, he had shrapnel in his head. So we got him bandaged up and sent back the line,” says Robert. “And that night they set up a replacement for him on his gun.”

The following day, the young gunner who’d taken over the injured soldier’s post was killed by a sudden burst of German gunfire, says Robert.

“I can see him now right today, only a young fella no more than 18 years of age...he joined up in St. John’s and when he went over to Halifax to come over with the draft they sent him back home because he was too young,” says Robert, adding the young man tried and was rejected a second time.

“And the third time he went over, the crowd in Halifax said, ‘If he’s that eager to go overseas, let him go.’ So if he had to go back to Newfoundland and stay there he’d have been alright; however, this is the way life is.”

LOVE & LOSS

It wasn't only comrades that Robert lost during the war; he lost family, too. While Robert braved the Second World War on land, his brother Doug, a member of the Royal Air Force, was fighting from the skies. Doug was 21 when his plane was shot down over Dunkirk, France. Robert was in North Africa at the time – but he says his gut told him something was wrong.

"I went up away from the camp to write a letter and I just got settled away when a shiver went right down through me," remembers Robert. "It was so pronounced that I had to come back, and I said to one of the young fellas there, I said, 'B'y, I got some fright,' I said. 'It was like someone walked over my grave.' And this young fella said to me, 'That's someone in your family is after passing away.'" A week later, Robert received a letter confirming his brother Doug was missing in action. (Another of his brothers, John, fought with the Royal Navy. He was torpedoed several times,

says Robert, but survived and eventually went on to serve in the Merchant Navy. He passed away two years ago, aged 93.)

It was March of 1945 and nearly five years since Robert – by now a sergeant – left Corner Brook, when he and his Newfoundland comrades were told they were finally being granted leave from their duties. Some members of the regiment were sent home; others, including Robert, were sent from the battlegrounds of Italy to England to await their turn, due to a lack of available ships.

"So we went from Florence right down to Naples in Italy and we turned in all our equipment down there and we went down to the wharf to go aboard the ship to go back to England, and do you know the name of the ship? The *Duchess of Richmond*," says Robert, as if still surprised by the coincidence some 70 years later.

But after five years of sailing the wartime seas, the ship that had brought the second draft of Newfoundlanders to Europe had become a veritable microcosm of the world at war. It, too, was battered and bruised – and not a white tablecloth in sight.

"You wouldn't recognize it; she was taking prisoners back and forth and taking troops back and forth and they had the ship wrecked," says Robert. Nevertheless she ferried them safely to their respite in England, where Robert made good use of his extended layover.

While he hadn't seen his girl, Anne Wardrop, since the regiment marched

down the streets of Lesmahagow, Scotland years earlier, they hadn't forgotten each other.

"From '42/'43 I kept writing and she kept writing me. So when I came back [to England] I phoned her up and told her, 'I'm going to get some leave and come up,'" says Robert. "So when I went up to Lesmahagow I asked her to marry me, and that's it." The pair wed in a simple ceremony at the Presbyterian church in Lesmahagow, Scotland in September 1945. (Death parted them 56 years later, when Anne passed away in 2002.)

HEADING HOME

The following March, Robert finally boarded an aircraft carrier and headed for home, arriving on St. Patrick's Day, 1946. His war bride followed by ship, first arriving in Halifax, Nova Scotia a few weeks later. The newlyweds lived with Robert's parents until they received a government grant to assist with the building of a home of their own in Corner Brook. They raised one son and Robert, who spent much of his career working in the mill's stores, went on to serve his community with much the same fervour he had served king and country. He put in six years on the voluntary fire brigade and four years on Corner Brook West town council, and sat on committees that oversaw the construction of buildings such as the Interfaith Home, Presbyterian church and Royal Canadian Legion. Still, every year around Remembrance Day he speaks to the local schoolchildren about his time at war, though he



Robert Grant, pictured in recent years, will turn 97 in June.

admits he doesn't know how much longer that tradition will continue. "When you're 96 years of age, you haven't got the get up and go," he says.

Asked if he considers himself a hero for his six years at war, he answers matter of factly: "There was a job had to be done. If we didn't go to North Africa...the Germans would be in there now," says Robert. "There's one thing I will say: the 166th Newfoundland Field Regiment – we never retreated. We went into action and we conquered all North Africa and Italy, along with the Eighth Army." It is of that fact, and of the Newfoundland Regiment as a whole, that Robert seems the most proud.

Of the 212 young men who left Newfoundland with the second draft, Robert believes he is the last veteran left living to tell their tale.

And what a tale it is. ☺



Robert Grant and Anne Wardrop (centre) wed in Scotland in 1945.