

Ritchie, Fred (1919-2017) and Percy

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If you're born lucky, even your rooster will lay eggs. Russian proverb

Fred Ritchie feels he's been collecting rooster eggs throughout his life. Today, this active octogenarian looks out on the panorama of Lake Okanagan from his Naramata home and counts his blessings. He looks back on a life of many adventures, successes and contrasts: a city boy who felt most at home in the country, an infantryman who aspired to command tanks, a businessman who dreamed of being a farmer. Fred Ritchie has experienced it all.

Born in England in 1919, Fred grew up in Montreal. Each summer he would escape the city's bustle and traffic by working at his grandmother's Laurentian resort. "She had about eight cabins on a lake and she would hire me to cut bush, pump water and do other handyman chores. Of course, it wasn't all work. There was a raft for swimming, I built a shack in the woods and even created a muddy tennis court. The Laurentians were a wonderful playground for a kid." Fred's father had served in WW1 and had risen through the ranks so quickly that he became colonel of his battalion at age twenty six. "He fought at Ypres, Hill 70, all the big battles, but when he came home he kept those horrible memories inside him - he never talked about the war. That was the expectation in those days."

The oldest boy in a family of four children, Fred remembers being raised to keep his own emotions contained. When WW2 broke out he responded to an unspoken sense of duty and enlisted at age 20 along with most of the young men he knew. "It was a foregone conclusion. I knew it was what I had to do." At the train station his father shook his hand and confined his advice to "keep your head down" while his mother kissed him on the cheek and told him the cookie jar would be filled when he returned.

Fred's first year of service was spent in the bush of Newfoundland guarding the Gander Airport that was so crucial for the Lend-Lease program. "America was supplying England with badly-needed planes. Our job was to protect the airport from possible attack by German paratroopers. We patrolled each day, caught salmon on our time off and swatted mosquitoes constantly. Our officers were bored but I found it quite an adventure. Still, I really wanted to contribute more directly to the war effort."

Fred's rooster eggs really began to hatch when his regiment was ordered to travel across the country to Victoria after Japan entered the war. The mission: join two other infantry regiments sailing across the Pacific to defend

Hong Kong. Fred's unit, having to come the farthest, missed the boat (literally) and their lives were saved as a result. The two other regiments arrived in Hong Kong before the ships that were carrying their weapons got there and just as the Japanese forces invaded. Many of these men were slaughtered in the battle for Hong Kong or interned in hellish slave labour camps.

Instead of a Japanese concentration camp, Fred's regiment found itself stationed in Nanaimo. "We trained, we went on marches but I couldn't see any purpose in what we were doing." Craving action and wanting to do 'his bit,' Fred requested a transfer to a tank unit. Luckily, the officer in charge of the regiment had served with Fred's dad in WW1 and cooperated in expediting his transfer. Though his year of military experience had seen him rise to the rank of lieutenant, Fred was amazed to learn that a shift to the tanks would require him to take basic training along with raw recruits. Luckily, the training was carried out at Camp Borden in Ontario, so Fred had some time with his fiancée, Percy. They had known each other throughout their teenage years but it was only when Fred enlisted that romance blossomed. "I guess there was something about that uniform," said Fred with a twinkle in his eye. "Between that three months of basic training and three more months of tank training we got married, then I shipped out to Britain. Neither of us would ever forget that tearful good-bye. We didn't know what our future held." What it held was joy in the form of a baby daughter on the way, and more good luck.

Fred's extra six months of training in Canada meant that he arrived in Britain too late to participate in the ill-conceived Canadian raid at Dieppe. Saved from the fall of Hong Kong and now saved from the disaster of Dieppe, Fred was assigned to the Calgary Tanks, a unit that had lost half of its tanks on the beach at Dieppe. To Fred, this appointment felt like a huge break. "The Calgaries had spirit; you could sense it. Being farm boys, many of them had been around machinery all their lives. Tanks were a lot like tractors. I was a city boy and pretty green but it didn't matter. They were decent and cooperative and the best tank outfit in England. After a couple of months of training up in Yorkshire we shipped out for the invasion of Italy."

In the words of Gen George Marshall, the Italian campaign was "a grave strategic mistake." Like the Gallipoli disaster of WW1, it was conceived by Winston Churchill. Its purpose was to ensure the continuance of British power in the Mediterranean and thereby safeguard the shortest sea route to Britain's most valuable possession: India. The paradox of the Italian campaign was that its strategic goal, to tie down German divisions in Italy, could only succeed if its tactical goal (driving German troops out of Italy) failed. None of this mattered to the young Canadian warriors who steamed through the blue Mediterranean in July of 1943. "We were a bunch of kids on a top secret adventure, it was all very exciting."

That Fred survived the landing at Sicily in July of 1943 involved another miraculous bit of luck. War can be a compelling spectacle. The sound of shells creaming overhead, the arcing glow of tracer bullets, the flash and thunder of explosions all have strong visual appeal especially for young men who feel themselves invincible. Fred was standing on the deck of his troop ship watching the opening bombardment when a German *Stuka* screamed down and dropped five bombs around the front of the ship. "I saw these splashes and I looked into the water and thought, that's funny, I thought bombs made a bigger noise than that." Amazingly, all were duds. Fred chuckles as he remembers, "I can honestly say I was hit by several pieces of shrapnel that night. Fortunately, they were spent fragments that fell from the sky and hit me on the top of the helmet!"

Once ashore, the Calgaries saw little action. Sicily was mountainous with narrow roads, therefore the worst kind of country for tank warfare. The Italian troops they encountered were interested only in surrendering while the Germans wanted to safely evacuate their forces in order to mount a strong defence of the Italian mainland. So it wasn't until they'd crossed the Strait of Messina and began slogging their way up the boot of Italy that Fred's tanks faced determined German resistance.

"The 88s were the worst," recalls Fred. "I remember once our C Squadron was rushing up a mountain road to help some infantry capture a town and the German artillery picked off the first tank and the last tank in the formation. With nowhere to manoeuvre, the just 'brewed up' every tank in the column." While tanks offer protection from machine gun and mortar fire, they are not safe places. The American Sherman tanks Fred was commanding were known as 'Ronsons' for the way they burned. Gas, rather than diesel powered, they crammed

three men into a confined space surrounded by ammunition. If the tank was hit by an armour-piercing shell, those three men were in the center of a bomb. "Armament builds up a terrific heat. The shot is white hot when it penetrates the tank and all the ammunition explodes and burns. That's a 'brew-up'." Often the bodies were so totally charred in such an inferno that it was impossible to tell whether anyone had managed to get out alive. Added to this danger was the fact that German snipers were trained to target anyone sticking his head out of a tank hatch. "No matter how hot it was in summer, we kept our hatch closed and used the periscope for reconnoitring," said Fred. Despite participating in some of the fiercest action of the war, Fred's good fortune held. His tank was never hit.

Another stroke of luck that came to Fred and his Calgarys was getting to fight as part of the experienced Indian Division of the British 8th Army rather than alongside other Canadians. Dick Maltby, a subaltern with the Calgary Tanks, put it succinctly, "I think we preferred fighting with the Brits and Indians because we escaped the chickenshit with which the Canadian troops were afflicted." Lax dress codes and a spirit of military informality were but two advantages that combined with the experience and concern for troop safety which these veterans of the North African desert campaign possessed.

The Allied advance up the Adriatic coast featured many difficult river crossings. The Sangro and the Moro Rivers saw particularly fierce fighting since both were heavily defended. Each required set piece battles at which the 8th Army's Indian Division was experienced. Fred explained: "Their planning was meticulous, their use of artillery was designed to give maximum protection to the advance of the PBI (poor bloody infantry). Also, they fought with panache. I remember once, in the middle of a battle, holding a meeting with three of these British officers in a shell hole. For some reason they were in possession of a birthday cake and these old boys were chomping cake and sipping beer as cool as cucumbers while shrapnel whistled overhead. It was wonderful."

The fiercest action encountered by Fred and the Calgary Tanks, took place below Monte Cassino as the combined Allied forces faced the Gustav Line. A victory here and the road to Rome would be open. In many ways, this battle was typical of the disastrous waste of human life in the Italian campaign. Having access to the Ultra secret, Allied generals could read the secret German code and knew that some of Germany's best troops were dug into superb defensive positions and ordered to hold them until death. It is an axiom of warfare not to let the enemy pick the battlefield. Despite this, American General Mark Clark's Fifth Army and the British Eighth launched a frontal attack. After months of slaughter and stalemate, the Calgarys and their fellow Canadians established a bridgehead across the Rapido River and fought their way up the Liri Valley towards Rome. During this bloody fighting, Fred remembers his personal joy at receiving a gramophone record from his wife. "Some company paid for these recordings and I carefully carried mine until I discovered a wind-up record layer in a bombed out house. I sat in the rubble and listened to my wife and baby daughter. It was a very emotional time for me."

Rome was liberated on June 4th, 1944, the Normandy invasion happened two days later and both events took much of the intensity out of the Italian campaign.

Like every other soldier in extended combat, Fred Ritchie had to face the growth of 'the worm' of fear. This condition, so aptly described by Farley Mowat in his autobiographical work *And No Bird Sang*, begins with that feeling of invulnerability which had allowed Fred to coolly watch the Stuka attack at the outset of the campaign and progresses to an understanding that war's random destruction (those terrible 88s) meant death could happen to anyone. "Once you accept the idea that some friend died because 'his time was up' then you become aware that your own time may be running out. The worm of fear grows in your gut." The worst stage, Fred explained, is the belief in the inevitability of your own death. The longer a person was within the range of shelling, the greater this personal foreboding became. Many men, such as Farley Mowat, obtained transfers out of the danger zone, in some cases soldiers hoped for 'a Canada' (a non-life threatening injury that would bring them home) and, in desperation, some soldiers even wounded themselves. Luckily, Fred possessed the organizational and administrative talent to rise to the position of second in command of his regiment. "My job was to make sure supplies of gasoline, ammunition and other essentials flowed smoothly to the front. Each night I

had to make contact with my commanding officer who was in a forward position, but following the battle of the Liri Valley, I was considered more valuable to my regiment in the rear echelon."

One of Fred's more clandestine administrative duties concerned arranging transport for 'the farm.' Since many of The Calgaries had been farmers before the war, they took a keen interest in the livestock that had been abandoned by local farmers as the war moved through the Italian countryside. Possibly there were less altruistic motives than animal husbandry for this concern. Christmas 1943 had found the Calgaries camped outside of Ortona eating gray, slimy rations that purported to be canned turkey. Throughout 1944, regiment members strove mightily to ensure that stray cattle, poultry and pigs did not fall into German hands. Proficiency with a lariat, which was not a skill possessed by their German foes, enabled the Calgaries to collect an impressive herd of 'liberated livestock.' Careful to schedule their precious animal convoys when Canadian army brass were not using the roads, the Calgaries managed to keep 'the farm' moving along with the regiment. By late 1944, the infantry unit they had been supporting was out of combat and with no enemy facing them, suffice it to say that Christmas 1944 was a huge gastronomic improvement over the previous year. Surplus turkeys were profitably bartered to other units in exchange for missing festive essentials and the Calgaries enjoyed three days of feasting and good fellowship. Fred swears that the Military Cross he received was awarded because his tank unit was one of the first to cross the Rapido River and NOT because of his skill at coordinating the movement of 'the farm'.

Shortly thereafter the regiment was re-assigned to northwest Europe and Fred was ordered to oversee the transit of the brigade's trucks through France to the new front in Belgium and Holland. Once there, Fred remembers little fighting and an exhausted enemy. "Everyone on both sides sensed that the war was ending and no one wanted to be the last casualty. The Dutch underground facilitated informal armistice talks between us and the Germans and then ... it was over. With five years of service and a wife and child at home, I had enough points to get back to Canada pretty quickly."

As with many returning veterans, Fred experienced a kaleidoscope of conflicting emotions. "I remember the first day back at work wearing a suit rather than the uniform I'd worn for five years. I felt suddenly anonymous. I had been a junior salesman in a cloth manufacturing company before the war and that was the job I went back to, even though it had no appeal for me. Work was scarce and I had a growing family to feed." Capitalizing on the administrative skills he had developed during his years of service, Fred rose to become sales manager for Montreal and the Maritimes area. However, it was a gruelling six day a week job and both Fred and Percy longed for life in the slow lane. Another disturbing factor of 'civvy street' was the fact that Montrealers who had stayed home and made money during the war years had no interest in hearing a veteran talk about the war. Fred's growing disenchantment with both 'the rag trade' and life in the big city encouraged him and Percy, who was a well-respected artist, to begin dreaming of moving to the country and taking up farming.

This dream began to come true when Fred and Percy arrived in BC to attend his brother's wedding. "It was June, cherry season, when we first visited the Okanagan and we thought this is it!" It took three more years to disengage from their life in Montreal and sell their house but the Ritchies' vision never wavered. Once again, Fred's luck held because they arrived in Naramata in 1956. "The big freeze of '55 had wiped out some orchardists and there was prime land for sale. We were very green but the local farmers were extremely helpful and friendly. We knew immediately this was a great place to live and raise our kids. We couldn't have been happier."

At the time of this writing, Fred Ritchie is one of the most respected and best loved citizens of Naramata. His four children enjoy successful lives and Fred himself is a newly minted author and proprietor of a Christmas tree farm. Though he recently lost Percy, he feels he has no reason to complain. "We enjoyed 63 wonderful years, and Percy's spirit lives on in her paintings. Having been lucky in life and lucky in love, I can honestly say I have no regrets." Fred's legion of friends and admirers hope he continues to enjoy rooster eggs at breakfast for many more years.