

# Christmas Dinner with Bomber Harris

by Gerry Cann:

The advance party for 2 Fighter Wing arrived in France in October 1952, part of the Canadian contribution to the Cold War. Three more would follow, based in Germany forming a full air division serving under NATO. The base was under construction, muddy and generally unliveable, and would remain that way for quite some time. Electricity and heated buildings would not appear until late winter. But throughout that period our Sabre fighters flew while we struggled to live in some degree of comfort. Morale, which could have sunk, remained high as we dealt with the challenge.

In mid-December a list of those selected for a ten-day special leave appeared. My name and that of my chum, Frank Turner, were on it. On the 22nd we flew to Northolt, and somehow transferred to the underground rail system. We emerged at Charing Cross where our first view of London was Trafalgar Square. There was not a hotel room to be had in the west end. Totally lost, we wandered down White Hall. A Bobby in Downing Street directed us to The Overseas League where our Canada patch got us a room. My membership card which I still have indicates that I registered as G.D. Cann, RCAF.

Next morning, we received a call saying that Sir Arthur would like to meet us in the bar. Curiously, we hurriedly dressed and went hunting for the bar where we were introduced to Sir Arthur Harris. Versed in Air force lore, I knew immediately who he was: Bomber Harris! Not as impressionable now as I was then, I believe I would still look at that man with the same awesome wonder as I did then. It was an unlikely meeting; I was a 23-year-old Corporal and Frank a rank lower, meeting socially with a man who held the most senior rank in the RAF. I sensed that morning what proved to be true in later life when my job involved interviewing senior government officials: highly ranked people are easy to be with.

Sir Arthur quickly put us at ease. With a warm handshake he said that we were the first Canadians he'd seen since the war and gave us a double scotch. My first scotch, and I've been an aficionado of the stuff ever since, but not before breakfast. He had just returned to England from South Africa.

A fighter pilot during WWI with five victories to his credit, Sir Arthur had remained with the Royal Air Force through the peace and had advanced in rank as the years passed - an Air Chief Marshall when Churchill appointed him Chief of Bomber Command in 1942. He became one of the great commanders of WWII, only to live with the knowledge that his command was responsible for the almost total destruction of Germany's industrial cities, and the deaths of 600,000 civilians. Then too was the fact that the young men who flew in RAF Bomber Command had a small chance of completing the thirty missions which comprised their tour. They suffered a recorded loss of 55,573 aircrew killed, including some 10,000 Canadians who flew with RAF squadrons. More than 8000 were wounded and slightly less than 10,000 imprisoned. Consider Churchill's later observation: "There are no extraordinary men; simply ordinary men who, in extraordinary circumstances, are called upon to do extraordinary things."

After the war Sir Arthur was promoted Marshall of the Royal Air Force, the highest rank of the service. The computer network carries his detailed history.

We talked for probably an hour. Sir Arthur simply treated us as he would treat a friend. I remember his curiosity about the Canadian fighter wings and our relationship with the Americans. And I remember our curiosity about the war and his answers to our questions. Of the rest I have no detailed recollection save for the fact that he enquired about our plans for Christmas and asked, would we join him for dinner on that day. I don't recall seeing Sir Arthur again before Christmas. When Frank and I arrived in the lobby at the appointed time Sir Arthur was waiting for us with two young women. He had contacted Canada House, found two Canadian girls alone for Christmas, and invited them to dinner. Company for us, and I suppose, we for him. So, we five celebrated Christmas with a memorable dinner in that wonderful old club. Four young Canadians, well out of our depth, but made welcome! I still have the menu but was too shy to ask Sir Arthur to sign it. We were told later that there was an envelope at the desk for us. It contained Sir: Arthur's gift: four tickets for two top-rated shows.

We stayed in London until January 2nd. I remember my first stage show: South Pacific in Drury Lane with the original cast, and then on New Year's eve, BBC Ballroom; true-blue British music hall; both shows in the company of those two Canadian girls.

And then we flew back to Grostenquin and the rain, and the mud where I remained until posted as supply liaison with 441 Silver Fox squadron in January 1954.

Fast forward to the mid-seventies: My wife Jean had a long-time school friend who was secretary to a number of Canadian ambassadors or high commissioners in various parts of the world. She and a fellow embassy secretary, both on leave, were at dinner in our home one day. Over the table I told this story. The visiting lady smiled and said, ``I was one of those girls!''

When a parliamentary white paper in 1964 announced a planned unification of the Canadian armed forces, Sir Arthur's opinion on that idea appeared in the Ottawa Citizen. His address was in the by-line, and I remembered that we never had the opportunity to thank him formally for his kindness. I wrote him a letter and received a short hand-written acknowledgement that he did remember the occasion.

