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An RCAF Erk in England and North Africa, 1941-1945 The War Story of Leading Aircraftman Kenneth Frank Huntington

Matt Huntington

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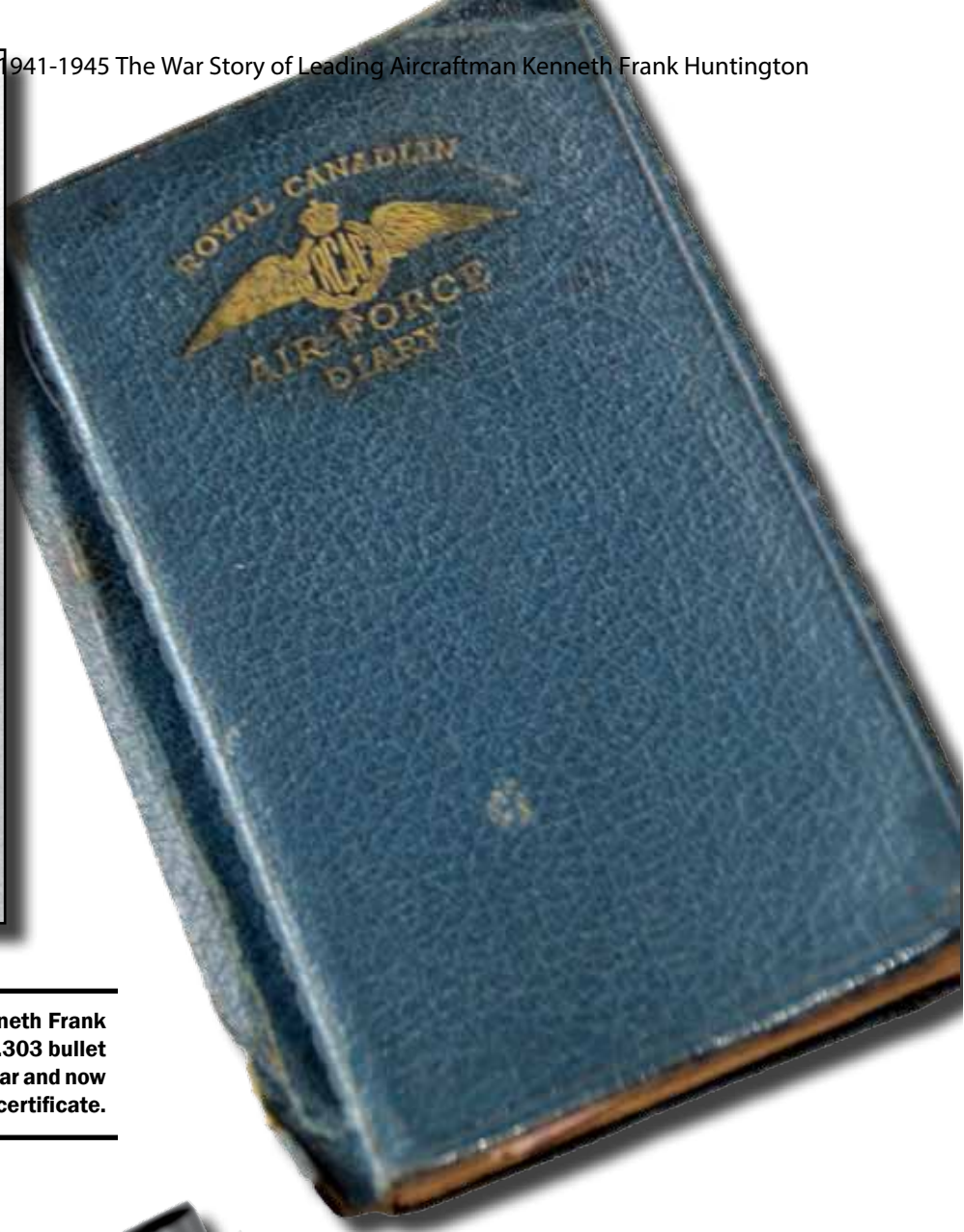


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Clockwise from top left: Leading Aircraftman Kenneth Frank Huntington; The diary he kept during the war; Two .303 bullet casings and a brass belt buckle returned from the war and now treasured by his grandson; His war service badge certificate.

DEPARTMENT OF NATIONAL DEFENCE
(AIR FORCE)

This is to certify that No. *23rd R/112611* Rank *LAC*
 NAME *K. F. Huntington*
 is entitled to wear War Service Badge, "General Service Class",
 Number *709161*
 Signature of Holder *[Signature]*
J. R. Johnson E/C
 Signature of Issuing Officer
 Issued this *16* day of *Dec* 194*5*
 D.C.A.F. G. 138-210M-248 (1937-11-C), 565 G. 123

Description of Holder

Age *24* Height *5'9"* Eyes *Blue* Hair *Fair*
 Address *246 Eglinton Ave. E.*
Toronto



An RCAF Erk in England and North Africa, 1941-1945

The War Story of Leading Aircraftman Kenneth Frank Huntington

Matt Huntington

The outlook of a child is fueled by imagination and tinted by innocence. This article has its beginnings in my own childhood perceptions. I was a seven year-old boy, who found out that his grandfather had served in the Second World War. I initially had images of one man taking on a thousand, like Samson before the Philistines. This, however, was not the case. My grandfather had never seen the front, but rather had been well behind the lines as a member of the RCAF working on bombers as they sat safely on the ground. As a 7-years-old child, my worldview had been almost completely shaped by my immediate family – my paternal grandfather being one of the largest influences in my life to that point. My knowledge of him was based on my observations: he was old, he drove a Volkswagen, he always seemed to have documented everything with his camera, he thanked God before each meal, and he had two large photos of airplanes hanging above his computer desk. These were framed posters of a Vickers Wellington bomber and a Short Sunderland Flying Boat – both from around the Second World War. The image of these two planes sitting above his desk have forever been rooted in my memory, and even at

Abstract: Kenneth Frank Huntington (1921-2001) was a British-born Torontonian who answered the call of duty in the Second World War and served in the RCAF from 1941 to 1945. He was an aircraft maintenance technician, and from early 1943 until late 1945 was overseas servicing bombers in combat squadrons. The present account, by his grandson, draws on the diary he kept in 1943 (which includes his deployment to North Africa with No.424 Squadron, RCAF), correspondence with his wife, family and friends while he was overseas, and commentary he wrote later in life. His writings recorded not only his experiences, but reflections on military service, and the challenges of re-adjustment to civilian life after the war.

that young age ignited my interest in Second World War history which led me to pursue a history degree and a desire to learn more about Leading Aircraftman (LAC) Kenneth Frank Huntington's war story. Regardless of his involvement, it has always made me proud that he was there when Canada and the world needed him.

As a young child, I had very basic questions about these photos and why they hung where they did, but without knowledge of the events which shaped the world in the first

half of the twentieth century, I could not understand my grandfather's life altering experience. The answers to my questions led me to believe my Grandfather was some sort of G.I. Joe war hero – instantly I had images of my Grandfather running through battlefields with bullets whizzing around him as he carved his way into history as a fighting soldier. Sadly, I would never hear the story of my Grandfather's experiences during the Second World War from him. A series of strokes and dementia began to take over his body and ravage his brain – his memory of his children and grandchildren became non-existent and, as a result, his Second World War story was lost...or so I thought.

When I was 14 I was given an old cigar box that contained my grandfather's war service medals and a small blue book. I was more interested in the medals, a brass belt buckle and two discharged .303 cartridges with 1943 stamped on them then with an old book. That book turned out to be a daily diary my grandfather kept throughout 1943. I did not truly understand the importance of the diary until my advisor, Dr. Roger Sarty, began to look through it during an informal meeting and explained how valuable this piece would be to my paper. This only got better when I found a binder

in my father's office which contained the typed version of the diary with my grandfather's commentary added 50 years after the war. This paper is a tribute to a man, younger than I am even now, who volunteered to leave his wife and son, to travel across a hostile ocean to serve his country thousands of miles from home, to face the recognizable enemy: the Axis powers. There were also the less obvious enemies: fear, separation, and doubt. Researching this paper has been a complex and, at times, an emotionally draining process because much of my grandfather's story melted away as his dementia prevailed. This paper, therefore, follows the life of a typical "erk" – a ground crew member of the RCAF – and tries to understand their day-to-day activities. To use the movies as a metaphor, ground crew are portrayed by extras and seldom have speaking parts – I want to give them a voice.

Lead-up to Overseas Service, Beginnings in the RCAF, and Travel to Europe

“**N**ow the Canadian people, through their elected representatives in Ottawa, would decide whether or not to go to war.”¹

Kenneth Frank Huntington's road to overseas service began on 5 June 1941 when he enlisted with the RCAF.² Once he had completed training, he was posted to the “establishment of #1 Bombing and Gunnery School at Jarvis Ontario on October 14, 1941.”³ Kenneth received an RCAF embossed diary for Christmas 1942; this diary would eventually become a family heirloom.

Ken's parents presented him with the only diary he ever had on Christmas of 1942. Diaries and cameras were frowned upon in the Service in case notes or photographs fell into enemy hands. There was no concern with the Huntington's though...There

was little likelihood that his diary would fall into enemy hands, and less that any info therein would be of value!⁴

Ronald Blythe, in *Private Words: Letters and Diaries from the Second World War*, writes that “unless somebody manages to destroy today's world-wide telecommunications system, is it that millions of people will keep in touch via the written and not the spoken word as they did in the 1940s.”⁵ Kenneth's written words have lasted the test of time and are now giving insight to the lives of leading aircraftmen in the RCAF during the Second World War.

Kenneth's diary begins with an entry on Friday, 1 January 1943: “Valma [wife] and I saw the New Year in together. Kenny [Son] and June [sister in law] were sleeping. On duty watch from 15:00hrs today until 06:15 Sunday. Had a good turkey dinner on the station today. Not much to do tonight. Mel Ransom's wife gave birth to a girl today.”⁶ As Kenneth wrote this he did not know that he would miss every major holiday with his young wife and son for the next two and a half years. Kenneth spent much of his time on the station making repairs to planes and when away from the station he was putting great effort into providing for his family. On 11 January 1943 he wrote, “Bert Jupp offered me his '36 Chev for \$400. Valma thinks we can manage it.” It is clear that Kenneth is soon anticipating a posting overseas and is continuously worried about what shape he was leaving Valma and Kenneth Jr. in. Kenneth wanted to ensure that they would have everything they needed. He spent the rest of January working on various planes and performing his usual duty shifts. The moment Kenneth had been preparing for and anticipating for almost two years arrived on 31 January 1943: “POSTED OVERSEAS! Passed the medical about 11:00. Valma upset.” No doubt Valma was

acutely aware that there was no guarantee he would return home.

Kenneth's diary entry on 1 February 1943 provides insight into how he felt about men trying to get out of overseas service:

Not much sleep for either of us last night. Had a bad session with the dentist pulling an impacted tooth. Finished getting clearances signed. Bert Reeves turned down, Mac Mclean going in his place. Reeves later bragged he used brown paper to pull hidden hemorrhoids down to avoid going overseas. I consider him, who had no children, worse than a coward for letting a family man take his place.

Kenneth's biggest fear about joining the Service to fight in the war was that he would be a coward. He wanted to ensure that he did his bit and let no one down (Kenneth had always said that the only thing that scared him going overseas is that he would be a coward). So when a man like Reeves acts as a coward before even being posted, it is understandable that Kenneth reacted with anger.

Once Kenneth had been posted overseas he received embarkation leave.⁷ He began tying up loose ends to ensure that his family would be okay during his time overseas. The pending separation between Kenneth and Valma brought some tension into their relationship. On 3 February 1943 he wrote: “We were very busy unpacking and getting settled today. Both of us were tired and edgy.... Val and I visited the Walkers and the Neesons then went to a show. We met Harold Tugwell. He is on embarkation leave too.” During his embarkation leave Kenneth was busy spending as much time as he could with his family and friends. His brother Ron Huntington wanted to send him off right and organized a farewell party for 11 February 1943.⁸ Kenneth was grateful: “The party was a huge success and I'm sure I

will never forget it or the ones who provided it."

When Kenneth departed, on Monday, 15 February 1943, he wrote a long entry:

Busy with last minute packing, Unable to sell 'Nellie' [car]. Went down town with Ron. Had difficulty getting my dress uniform from the cleaners. Everyone has been so nice to me during my leave. I didn't expect such treatment. We boarded the train at 23:15hrs. I looked back from the ramp leading to the train and saw Valma waving with a smile on her face and tears in her eyes. If I had not been in love with her before, I would have fallen for her then. We departed at 00:15, and as the lights of Toronto receded I wondered when or if I would see my family, Valma and Kenny again, and meet the little one just beginning to grow in its mother.

Kenneth knew he was not going to be near the front lines, but there was still the uncertainty of being at war, he would be working closely with explosives and would be living on an RCAF air base that would make an excellent target for the *Luftwaffe*. There was no timeline for his service or the war and there was no guarantee that he would return home safely. But, if he did, would it be as he remembered?

Kenneth's first harrowing experience of the war was travelling to Europe. Crossing the Atlantic was not safe, as German u-boats were ready to inflict as much damage as possible to hinder the Allied war efforts. Kenneth arrived in Halifax, Nova Scotia at 0630 hours on Thursday, 18 February. Kenneth wrote in his diary, "Had breakfast and were assigned bunks at 'Y' depot. Protective and informative lectures this afternoon. Looked up Stan Leyland, and R.C.N. type and boyhood playmate whom I had not seen for several years. We had supper together, and then Stan had to report

THIS IS TO CERTIFY THAT—

No. CAN R 1128/1 Rank LPL

HUNTINGTON KENNETH FRANK

(Print full name in capital letters and underline surname) whose personal description, photograph and signature appear hereon, is serving in the

RCAF

Changes in rank or appointment to commissioned rank are to be indicated below. All entries must be made in ink by an officer. Signatures or initials are not required.


New Rank	Effective Date	Reference of official authority for change in rank and date of authority

Personal description of holder

Height 5' 9" Build Medium

Colour of eyes Blue Colour of hair Brown

Date of birth 18 April 1921



CARD No. 751961

Signature of holder [Signature]

Signature of Issuing Officer [Signature]


Rank F/LT Date 14 7 44

CONDITION OF ISSUE

1. This identity card is an official document and is issued subject to the conditions hereon and to the penalties and provisions of Section I of the Official Secrets Act 1930, and of the Defence Regulations. Its alteration, defacement, irregular use, transfer to another person, impersonation of the authorised holder, loss by neglect, destruction or unauthorised retention, are penal offences.
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3. This C.F.I. must be carried by the holder at all times. It is to be presented for inspection on the demand of a member of His Majesty's or Allied Armed Forces in uniform and on duty, or a policeman, or an official on duty at Protected Places or Areas.
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5. The holder of this card is to report its loss without delay to his (or her) C.O.
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IDENTITY CARD FOR ALL RANKS OF THE ROYAL AIR FORCE, WOMEN'S AUXILIARY AIR FORCE AND THE DOMINION AIR FORCES

CARD No. 751961

R.A.F. FORM 1250 (R)

for duty." Kenneth had left everything he knew at home, but soon connected with a friend from his childhood. War brought people together, but there was always caution, as they never knew when someone or themselves would be gone. On

Saturday, 20 February Kenneth was transferred to the Embarkation Wing and on 21 February he was placed on draught and put in "#5 Flight, 1 Squadron Embarkation Wing." In his commentary written 50 years later Kenneth added,

Being on draught means that we were not attached to any unit. We were en route to an unknown destination and were only informed of movements at the last minute. We were never told our destination. We were very naive at that stage and could not imagine any info we might have could be useful to an enemy 4000 miles away. As I sit copying this diary I can see many reasons why it should not have been written.⁹

If Kenneth's diary had fallen into the wrong hands the movements he describes could be of value to the enemy. Thankfully his diary stayed with him and made it back to Canada at the end of the war. On 2 March, Kenneth was in Taunton, Massachusetts where he felt it may be the last time to truly have a good meal before his diet began to consist of wartime rations so he treated himself to a full turkey dinner followed by a decadent dessert. On 10 March Kenneth was in Manhattan, New York where he boarded the *Queen Mary* for the trip overseas; he was placed in cabin C41 with a few of his friends. The next day Kenneth wrote, "On deck at 07:30 and spent most of the day there. The ship is huge and fast. She is armed with a six inch naval gun forward, and a degaussing [sic] cable is strung around her to nullify magnetic mines." He continues on 14 March that "Our zig-zagging [sic] course appears to be north today. The American Red Cross distributed parcels containing razor blades, soap and soap container[s], a book, boot laces, playing cards, and housewife which is a kit for sewing and darning. In his later commentary Kenneth reflects on the Red Cross package: "This turned out to be the only thing I or any man I knew throughout the war, ever received from the Red Cross. Sock balaclavas etc. knitted by mothers, wives, and others, and donated to the Canadian Red Cross, were sold to the servicemen. The exception seems



Huntington in January 1945.

to be related to boxes sent to P.O.W.s of which I have no knowledge apart from news reports."¹⁰ Kenneth arrived in England on Wednesday, 17 March 1943. Two days later on 19 March Kenneth arrived in Bournemouth, England where he was excited to hear his first air raid siren. In his commentary Kenneth wrote that, "Bournemouth was a R.C.A.F. Manning Depot from which individuals were assigned to their Stations or Squadrons; therefore, airmen were coming and going at all times and individuals were not together enough to become buddies. Each man was a 'loner' while there."¹¹ The last time Kenneth had been in England was in 1924 when he and his family left for a better life in Canada. On 21 March 1943 Kenneth had his photo taken for his 1250 identification card and on 24 March he wrote, "Received our 1250's. My picture is awful!" Having made it across the Atlantic safely Kenneth would soon begin service with No.428 Squadron RCAF¹² which flew the Vickers Wellington Mark III.¹³

Regular Day in England

A regular day for an RCAF erk consisted of many tedious tasks. Although strenuous, this work kept the squadron and its planes in the air. For Kenneth and many others, much of their war consisted of strings of "regular days." There were no bullets, or bombs, or other threats of imminent death – although these thoughts lingered. For an LAC, many days consisted of work on planes – kites as they were referred to in the service. On 29 March Kenneth wrote, "I was remustered [sic] to Air Frame Mechanic (Which suits me fine)... There were no major repairs today so we were able to catch up on low priority work." Two days later on 31 March a 40-hour inspection was done on Xray (each plane in a squadron had a letter designator, and was referred to by the phonic word for its letter, in this case for "X").¹⁴ Moving into April, the work on base was monotonous and sometimes boring: "Did miscellaneous jobs (killing time) most of the day. I was selected to be a dispersal guard tonight. Nothing of importance occurred."¹⁵ Ground crew duty on a regular day in England was not much different from service on a base back in Canada, but the test was to come when the comforts of home could not be found on the base or outside. Kenneth and his squadron left for North Africa on 15 May 1943.

Regular Day in North Africa

Kenneth reached North Africa on 27 May 1943. "We arrived in Algiers at 9:00am. I was on duty Guarding officers kit. The squadron debarked at 2:30pm but I stayed aboard. I am going to sleep in the officers [sic] quarters tonight." "Got permission to go to Algiers this morning to change money. Got lost coming back and ended up in Maison Blanches," he wrote on 1 June, but the novelty of the new surroundings

soon wore off. "There wasn't even a route march to break the monotony today," was his entry for 10 June. "Oh!, for some action!"

The squadron left Algiers on 19 June. The next day Kenneth wrote: "it is terribly hot and dusty. I slept for awhile. We stopped early and had supper and then went 16 kilometres further on to where the Americans had a fortified position and there we spent the night. I slept on the tailgate of the truck."

"Didn't get much sleep last night," was the entry for 21 June, "but I don't want to sleep in the truck today as we are entering the battlefields. What a mess! Saw a ME109F cracked up and the pilot's grave, a dismantled 75 mm and a blasted Arabian cemetery [sic] besides a lot of burned out tanks." The threat of the enemy was not the only thing that worried the men. According to the official history "dysentery, diarrhoea, malaria, and what was called jaundice were also taking their toll, and there was tremendous grumbling about

food."¹⁶ Kenneth's diary provided further detail. "I was issued with a mosquito net and extra blanket and I slept under the stars with Harold. I had the first attacks of dysentery [sic] today."¹⁷ Then, on 22 June, "Was on sick parade this morning and the M.O. gave me some pills and told me to take it easy all day. It has turned colder and it is raining like the devil."

On the night of 27 June No.424 Squadron began operations:¹⁸ "The squadron had its first ops tonight but 'R' dropped its 4000 pounder on the runway and 'S' piled into it so only half the kites [got away]. All returned." The official history supplies further information: "No 424 Squadron began operations on 27/28 June and had a much more difficult time. One crew lost a 4000-pound bomb on takeoff, but continued on to the target unaware of what had happened. Another machine burst a tire on takeoff and crashed, dropping its bomb as well."¹⁹ Kenneth had experienced his first taste of war, and the memories of the first operation would always linger, leaving the

uneasy thought, that one mistake could cost someone their life.

Irregular Day

Kenneth was not near the front lines, but was still engaged in dangerous work. On 2 July he wrote, "Did a little touching up on 'Q' but otherwise there was very little to do. Had a bit of an accident on the flight track and hurt my leg." With the squadron being so new and many of the men so inexperienced accidents were bound to happen. This is the diary entry for 6 July: "On the way back from post office I passed within 400 yards of two kites when they blew up. Col. Kelro lost one arm and may [lose] the other." Here is the account in the official history:

No 424 Squadron was nevertheless enduring a period of bad luck during this period, which may have accentuated the sourness expressed in its diary. It lost four of the six No 331 Wing crews killed or missing in the first three weeks of July, one

Personnel and groundcrew with a Vickers Wellington B.Mk.X of No.424 Squadron, RCAF that crashed en route to Tunisia, 3 June 1943. (l-r): Flight Officer W.H.J. Pickard, McAndrew, McManus, Canning, Ferguson, Leading Aircraftman A.C. Booth, and Corporal Kelso.





Above: Bomb Dump by Paul Goranson; Below left; A line of bombs ready to be loaded on No.424 Squadron Wellingtons in Tunisia; Below right: The haphazard nature of the bomb dump gives a good indication of the ad hoc nature of the RCAF airfield in Tunisia.



Photo courtesy C.G. Russell and John Ayers



Photo courtesy C.G. Russell and John Ayers

of them on the 6th when a fully fuelled and bombed-up Wellington caught fire in the dispersal area and exploded, killing three crew who had been sitting under the wing and wounded a number of others. 'Fragments from the bursts flew all over the camp setting grass fires,'

and a few seconds later a second machine was also on fire. It too blew up. What caused the fire was never discovered, but it was suspected that, as in the case of a No 420 Squadron Wellington that blew up two days before, the intense heat of the day might have had something to do

with it.²⁰

This was the first time Kenneth had seen death occur in front of him – it would not be the last.

Kenneth's squadron became operational in time to join in the invasion of Sicily on 10 July.²¹

“Worked on the bomb bays of T-Tommie today,” Kenneth recorded on 9 July. “Something big in the wind tonight. All our kites on Ops and we saw at least 200 troop carriers and bombers leave from this district.” The next day he wrote, “Invasion of Sicily started at 0300 hours this morning,” A few days later Kenneth noted that the renowned US Army Air Force General Jimmy Doolittle “sent his thanks for the hard work done by the squadron in the battle for Sicily. I’m mighty proud of our record.”²² *The Crucible of War* documents the praise 424 received from Doolittle,

Twice they won praise for their efforts from [US Army Air Force General] Spaatz and James H. Doolittle, who led the strategic component in the Northwest African Air Forces. On the first occasion, on 11/12 of July (the day American

and Canadian forces linked up at Ragusa), No 424 Squadron took advantage of the bright moon and light defences to strafe the airfield at Monte Corvino, near Salerno, after their bombing runs and claimed forty enemy aircraft destroyed.²³

Part of an LAC’s job was to assist when a plane encountered trouble on take-off or landing. This meant staring death straight in the face, as men were pulled from the crumbled remains of a plane with little hope of survival, or, possibly worse, collecting human remains in pieces from the runway in the hope of finding 70 pounds to represent each crew member onboard. Kenneth wrote on 10 July, “Supposed to go swimming today but it was scrubbed. Took the day off and wrote letters. All kites were to take off tonight again in waves of two but two of the objectives

fell so some were scrubbed. Eddy crooked up exploded. We fought fires with our bare hands and then helped to pick up what was left of the crew. The rear gunner was still alive when pulled out of the burning kite but he died in the ambulance. A shaky do!” There was a continuous loss of planes during operations. On 28 July Kenneth again wrote of a plane going down: “Spent the evening chatting with Doug. D-Donald pranged on the runway. I went out but there was nothing that I could do. Six men killed.” The next day yet again another plane went down: “Two five hundred pounders were detonated today. Jack, Doug and I went out to the wreck. It’s a hell of a mess.”

Kenneth saw things during his time overseas that stayed with him for the rest of his life, yet he would not speak of them to anyone. Only late in his life, when Kenneth’s

Final Stand-Off by Paul Goranson

Canadian War Museum 19710261-3721



mind deteriorated from strokes and dementia, did he begin to let snippets of his war experience come out.

Leave and Time Off

Kenneth enjoyed an extended leave when he first arrived in England. This was a time for him to catch up with family he had never met. Kenneth had immigrated to Canada with his parents when he was three years. On 17 April 1943 Kenneth reflected on an interesting encounter:

Aunt Daisy gave me tea in bed this morning, what a dear, kind lady! After breakfast Marjory, Aunt Daisy, and I did the shopping. There is little choice in foodstuff to purchase, and most items are rationed. It is particularly difficult for a widow living alone [to] get a properly

balanced meal. For example, when my aunt went to the local butcher shop she was offered sausage for her weekly meat ration. The butcher said he had nothing else. Good sausage can be part of a good meal, but to eat sausage for a week?

In the few weeks I have been in England I have had several sausage dinners and understand why the old hands call a sausage bread-in-battle-dress! The chief ingredient seems to be bread crumbs laced with seasoning. The meat, not much more than the gut the crumbs are stuffed in! The butcher was still talking when I stepped to aunties side. "Is he with you?" He asked as he nodded his head in my direction. "Yes," she replied. He then reached under the counter and wrapped up a nice piece of beef!

J.L. Granatstein and Desmond Morton discuss rationing in their book *A Nation Forged in Fire*, "Meat rationing was a nuisance for both butchers and customers; when every ounce of meat had its price in coupons and tokens, meal planning became an art."²⁴ While on leave Kenneth got a taste of what life was like for the average citizen not in the service.

While Kenneth was in the combat zone he spent most of his down time watching films and writing letters to Valma and family back home. Sometimes there was a special diversion: "This evening I had a chance to drive a B.M.W. [motorcycle] captured from a German Panzer division."²⁵

Letters home

Audrey and Paul Grescoe, compilers of *The Book of War Letters*, quoted Pierre Berton: "In their letters home, the men at the front ... did their best to relieve their [loved ones'] anxieties by playing down the horrors and discomforts of the front."²⁶ They also stated:

During the past century – when Canadians have gone abroad to defend the nation, the Empire, western allies, and the United Nations – correspondence sent from the battlefield has always served four purposes: venting, heartening those left behind, sustaining ties, and comforting the bereaved. Letters from home have done similar duty, bucking up the fighting men and women without dwelling unduly on domestic problems that would add to their burden.²⁷



Thoughts of reporting the incident to some department went through my mind, but then I thought maybe the butcher might remember me when my Aunt shopped there again. He did! Right to VE day. After shopping we wandered around town and met my fourteen year old cousin Una Jarvis. Cousin Harry Lamkin and his wife Margaret dropped-in during the afternoon, but didn't stay long. Aunt and I went to the State movie theatre this evening and saw "Arabian Nights."

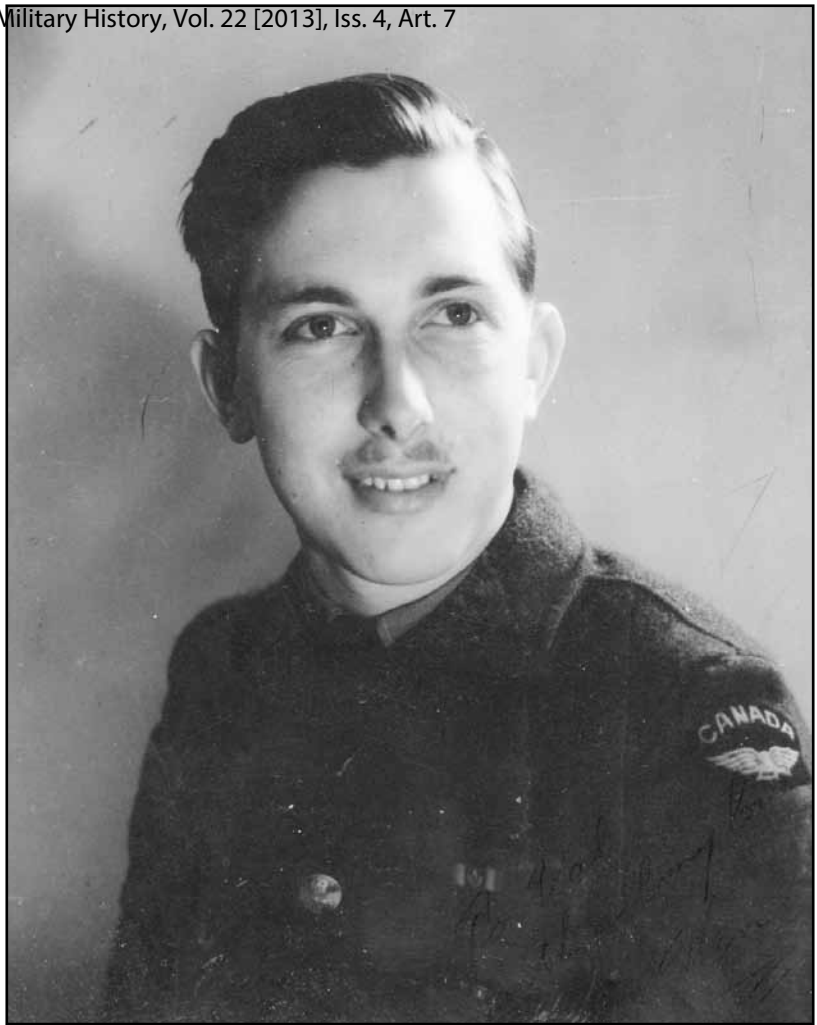
Huntington and his cousin Una Jarvis feed pigeons in London's Trafalgar Square.

Servicemen and women writing home focused on the good and, in Kenneth's case, always referred to his future homecoming.

Kenneth missed the birth of his second child, a daughter named Joanne, while overseas. "Our baby daughter was born around the beginning of this month," he wrote on 23 October 1943. Kenneth was unsure for weeks if the birth had gone well because of delays in postal deliveries. Letters often arrived in large batches at infrequent intervals; Kenneth received a parcel and package of 17 letters on 23 October.

The British author Ronald Blythe observed that "Marriage by correspondence was to be a common fate during the war. Those parted, often for three or more years, soon realized that another form of continuity had to be established as no relationship could stand so long a break."²⁸ Kenneth married Valma on 3 July 1940 and left for his overseas service on 15 February 1943; he would return home 22 November 1945. At the end of Kenneth's war service he had been married to Valma for five and a half years, but they had been apart for fully half of this time. Faithful communication was the key to their strong relationship, but even so there were issues that arose when they were reunited.

Valma was notorious for keeping everything that was of importance to her, and it is no surprise that she kept all of the letters Kenneth had sent her during the war. Sadly, Valma destroyed many of these letters when in her final years she suffered the same disease as Kenneth had endured before his death – dementia. The majority of letters that have survived are from 1945, near the end of the war. The themes of the letters are very similar; Kenneth wrote of his longing for home, wondering what life would be like when he returned, and reflecting on what he would need to do for his family to prosper in the post-war world.



Huntington sent this photo to his wife in July 1944 and signed it: "To Val...for our son."

In a letter dated 25 April 1945 Kenneth confessed to Valma how he was torn over purchasing a car or not.²⁹ Kenneth went through the reasons why he thought a car would be valuable for their family, but left the decision with Valma: "I would like to have a car, especially Bert's because it sounds as though it would suit us fine, but such an important thing cannot be left to me to decide because it involves money that we both have gone without in order to save."³⁰ He was right to be cautious. So much had to be decided in rebuilding their life together, but letters were a weak reed; meaning and context could easily be lost.

Tim Cook speaks to the countless and continuous flow of letters between service men and women

to those left at home, "Canadians overseas also remained deeply connected to their families, friends, and communities. Tens of millions of letters passed back and forth over the oceans – missives of love and longing, of unspoken fear and forced banalities. Carefully inscribed words or hastily scribbled notes were often the only messages received over a period of years."³¹ In the best circumstances, where relationships endured, letters provided essential reassurance everything was okay; it was something physical to hang on to.

Communication did not stop when the war ended, since many friendships were created from the shared experience of military service. This is evident in a letter sent to

Kenneth from his friend Tomy Thompson. Tomy (also an LAC)³² wrote to Kenneth from the Pacific theatre and was eager to know how Kenneth was settling back in at home.³³ Friendships like this came and went and it is uncertain to the degree Kenneth and Tomy stayed in touch after the war, but their friendship certainly meant a good deal during their service overseas.

Kenneth, when the squadron was particularly active, often had to struggle to find the time and the focus to write letters to those he loved back home, but he never failed to do so. Kenneth would have made it through the war without the letters, but he would have been far worse off when he returned to Toronto.

Struggles and Uncertainty

There are no certainties in war, and that hard fact can – perhaps inevitably does – become more burdensome the longer one serves. Kenneth acutely felt that uncertainty from the beginning of his movement overseas: “We departed at 00:15, and as the lights of Toronto receded I wondered when or if I would see my family, Valma and Kenny again, and meet the little one just beginning to grow in its mother.” One of the greatest struggles for Kenneth was being away from his children. His letters promised to make up for lost time with Kenneth Jr. On 1 September 1943 Kenneth wrote, “Remember me to all and give my love to Kennie. Tell him that his daddy thinks of him often and that he is looking forward to coming home to his big son soon... when I get home, we are going to play together...and make up for lost time.”³⁴ Kenneth would not see little Kennie for over two years after the letter was written.

Epilogue

Kenneth returned home after almost three years away from

Canada on 22 November 1945. Ronald Blyth highlighted the challenges of homecomings: “the personalities of both partners would be more changed then they realized by the unusual freedoms and disciplines of the war. A glance in the mirror or a look at the situation in which they now found themselves would often confirm that they were not the people they were when they said goodbye. The war had ‘done something to them.’”³⁵ So it was when Kenneth returned to Toronto on 22 November 1945, and he and Valma saw each other for the first time since February 1943. Valma had become a single parent raising two children in arguably their most formative years; the 20-year-old girl Kenneth had left behind was now an independent 23-year-old. Valma, for her part, imagined that Kenneth would return home in peak physical condition from his years of service. This notion proved to be untrue, as wartime rations and hard work had taken their toll on him.

Kenneth, hardened by his experiences, had become rougher in his manner and picked up bad habits in his time overseas – smoking was the hardest to break. Kenneth returned to children that did not remember his face or had never seen it. These relationships needed to be rebuilt and created. He also needed to integrate into society: find employment, continue his education and build a first house. Between the war absence and the demands of establishing his family financially, Kenneth missed the formative years of his first two children and it was not until his son Paul was born in 1961 that he would have the chance to live these experiences in any of his children’s lives. War changed Kenneth, but it did not break him. He worked past all the problems he encountered upon his return and lived a life to be proud of – as his family and friends attest.

Kenneth and Valma celebrated their 60th wedding anniversary on

3 July 2000. They would not see their 61st. A series of strokes along with Alzheimer’s and dementia had taken their toll on Kenneth’s body and mind. He spent the last years of his life in the veteran’s wing of Toronto’s Sunnybrook Hospital. That was the first time since the war that Kenneth and Valma had lived apart; Valma faithfully visited as much as the staff would allow. She was not there on the night in early April 2001 when Kenneth woke and attempted to get out of bed, fell, and lapsed into a coma. He died, without regaining consciousness, in the early morning of 24 April 2001. This marked the end of Kenneth Frank Huntington’s life, but not its impact. Kenneth did not die knowing he was a hero – he would not have wanted to be called one – but those closest to him knew that he was.

Conclusion

There are millions of war stories and this is just one of them. By studying these experiences we introduce the human element of war – this is the element that makes war an ordeal and the hard fought victory sweet. Furthermore, studying the human element of past conflicts helps us to understand the needs and concerns of service people who are in harm’s way today – there will probably always be armed conflict, but the experience of men and women who have endured it inevitably slips away, unless these experiences are actively preserved. This essay was first and foremost a family project. I longed to understand my grandfather’s war story, as it had become a defining moment in my family history. What I learned during the research and writing was that this story was like so many other average young Canadians who served their country when their country most needed them.

Not every day at war sees blood and destruction, but death and injury,

including the psychological scares of those physically untouched, are the essence of war. Ground crew were not near the front lines. Stephen Ambrose would have never written *Band of Brothers* about the people who served on an air base. Yet no one signed up to die; rather they signed up to do their bit, they signed up to protect the "True north strong and free"; they signed up for Canada. In the words of aviation historian Larry Milberry, "The aircrew were supported by an army of staff officers and tradesmen who serviced the aircraft, maintained a steady flow of supplies, kept pay accounts and handled administration. There were few rewards for such service."³⁶ Kenneth received three medals: The Canadian Volunteer Service Medal, The Defence Medal, and The War Medal 1939-1945. He could have applied for other medals based on his service and the operations he was involved with, but it upset him that he had to make an application. He had given his all for Canada and applying for medals was something he should not need to do.

Robert England reflects on his time in France near the end of the First World War, "When this bloody war is over, Oh! How happy I shall be, When I put my civvy clothes on, No more soldiering for me."³⁷ Historian Marcus Cowper writes in *The Words of War: British Forces' Personal Letters and Diaries during the Second World War* that,

Some of the diaries in this collection were written with a view to posterity, with the author consciously considering what material to include or reject. Others were scribbled down daily, or even hourly, with terse entries reflecting the immediate events affecting the writer.

The personal experiences of those who lived through the Second World

War differed wildly and this is reflected in the contents of the diaries and letters. Sometimes the material contains simple lists of the author's daily routines, in other instances detailed expositions on their state of mind and feelings.³⁸

Kenneth's diary entries – his communication with us now – were written down in no specific order and include both the spontaneous and reflective elements mentioned by Cowper. Still, his intentions became clearer when he took the time to add commentary later in his life. Those intentions have been fulfilled. His diary and commentary is our way – here and now – to understand something so far in the past that his children have grandchildren and great-grandchildren.

Notes

Unless otherwise noted, photos supplied by author.

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3. Kenneth F. Huntington War Diary Commentary, Toronto, 1994.
4. Kenneth F. Huntington War Diary Commentary, Toronto, 1994.
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6. Kenneth Frank Huntington, 1943 Diary of Overseas Service, 1 January 1943 [unless otherwise noted, all quotations are from this source].
7. Huntington, Overseas Diary, 3 February 1943.
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9. Kenneth F. Huntington War Diary Commentary.
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14. Huntington, Overseas Diary, 31 March 1943.
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16. Brereton Greenhous, Stephen J. Harris, William C. Johnston, and William G.P. Rawling, *The Crucible of War, 1939-1945: The Official History of the Royal Canadian Air Force, Volume III* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1994), p.648.
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18. Greenhous et al, *Crucible of War*, p.647.
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25. Huntington, Overseas Diary, 30 August 1943.
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27. Audrey Grescoe and Paul Grescoe, eds, *The Book of War Letters* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 2003), p.3.
28. Blythe, *Private Words*, 14.
29. "Hello Darling," Kenneth F. Huntington to Valma Huntington, 25 April 1945.
30. "Hello Darling," Kenneth F. Huntington to Valma Huntington, 25 April 1945.
31. Tim Cook, *We Were Freedom: Canadian Stories of the Second World War* (Toronto: Historica-Dominion Institute, 2010), p.69.
32. "Dear Ken," Tomy Thompson to Kenneth Frank Huntington, 1945.
33. "Dear Ken," Tomy Thompson to Kenneth Frank Huntington, 1945.
34. "Dearest Valma," Kenneth F. Huntington to Valma Huntington, 1 September 1943.
35. Blythe, *Private Words*, p.14.
36. Larry Milberry, ed., *Sixty Years: The RCAF and CF Air Command 1924-1984* (Toronto: Canav Books, 1984), p.177.
37. Robert England, *Discharged: A Commentary on Civil Re-establishment of Veterans in Canada* (Toronto: Macmillan Company of Canada Limited, 1944), p.vii.
38. Marcus Cowper, *The Words of War: British Forces' Personal Letters and Diaries During the Second World War* (London: Mainstream Publishing, 2009), p.13.

Matt Huntington, a native of Toronto, graduated from Wilfrid Laurier University in 2013. In his final year he participated in the War and Society seminar, a full year course, and produced an early draft of the present article.

Dear Sir,

I wish to comment on an article by Hugh A. Halliday, in which the Canadian war artist Algernon Talmage and his paintings depicting the Canadian Army Veterinary Corps (CAVC) in the Great War are discussed (See *Canadian Military History*, Summer 2012).¹ Any reference to the CAVC is welcome, since, seemingly as obscure as Talmage, it may as well have been the "Secret Service," not being named in the official history of the Canadian Army in the First World War,² and being the only Corps omitted from the National War Memorial in Ottawa.³ However, while providing a little general background on the CAVC, and detailed information on a few of its activities, Halliday perpetuates its occult existence by failing to refer readers to the major published source on the CAVC, by Captain Cecil French.⁴ And, curiously for a scholarly article, few authorities are cited for a number of statements of fact about Talmage's postwar career; this reader also had little luck substantiating the points annotated by reference to a museum catalogue number. While published biographic information on Talmage certainly is meagre,⁵ the Cornwall Artist's Index⁶ provides a useful capsule summary of his artistic influences and achievements, and of his life, including domestic disruption, and the premature death of his life companion in the year prior to his engagement as a war artist.

Background research on the image known as "A Mobile Veterinary Unit in France," selected as the cover illustration for French's book, as it was for the volume of *Canadian Military History* containing Halliday's article, revealed a few points which supplement Halliday's paper. Access to the diary of Captain Alfred Savage,⁷ stationed at No.1 Canadian Veterinary Hospital at Le Havre during Talmage's visit, provided insights on interactions of the Veterinary Officers with "some sort of 'war artist.'" who "cannot draw rations, but helps us eat ours" (bad



pun, intended).⁸ Savage's opinion softened over Talmage's nearly three month sojourn in Le Havre (18 June to 5 September 1918, the date of his departure for the Canadian Corps),⁹ and he developed a warm relationship with "Algy," involving social events in town, and mess dinners, that continued into a leave in London after the armistice. However, Talmage was at work, too; probably eight and possibly nine of his 25 works depict scenes at the Veterinary Hospital.¹⁰

Halliday's presumption about when Talmage painted near the front, based on an August 1918 date for breaching of the Hindenberg Line, is in error. By 5 September, when Talmage left for the Canadian Corps, Arras and Quéant were in Allied hands, and the Canadian Corps was consolidating its position west of the Canal du Nord. But the crossing of the Canal du Nord (27 September), and the battle for the Hindenberg Line, the capture of Cambrai (9 October) and the assault over the Selle River (17 October) lay ahead.¹¹

The duration of Talmage's time near the front is uncertain, but Agny, Écoust, Quéant and Wancourt, identified in the title of one or more works, are close to, but south or southeast of, Arras, and west of the Canal du Nord, suggesting that those paintings may have been begun prior to the end of September. References in other titles to locations "on the Hindenburg Line," and at Inchy, 18 kilometres southeast of Cambrai, but west of the Selle River, indicate that he remained in the area into mid-October 1918, recording activity behind the lines during the battles that followed the crossing of the Canal du Nord.

Halliday's paper silently illustrates a conundrum involving Talmage's Canadian war art: there are two images called "A Mobile Veterinary Unit in France." The better known one hangs in the Senate Chamber and graced the cover of the summer 2012 issue of *Canadian Military History*. The smaller, less well known work is illustrated on page 63 of Halliday's article.¹²

While investigating the provenance of the cover art for French's book,¹⁴ it became apparent to me that the larger image was recorded in the catalogue of four exhibitions of Canadian war art, held in London, New York, Montreal and Toronto in 1919,¹⁵ as no. 53, "The Road to Henin," identifiable by the caption "Germans shelling the ridge," describing a unique feature of the painting. A second painting, no. 51, "A Mobile Veterinary Unit," lacks a caption, but presumably is NWM no. 8840 (but with a shorter name). Exhibition no. 44, "A Mobile Veterinary Unit near Queant" retains its name in the NWM collection, as catalogue no. 8839/CMC no. 19710261-0698. However, at the Canadian War Memorials Paintings Exhibition in Toronto in 1920, the single Talmage work, hung as no.156, was NWM no. 8735, now titled

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