Regret deeply…”
The Second World War Experiences of Bill and Fred Tucker

Angela Fritz

Over a million Canadians wore a uniform in the fight against Hitler’s Germany. The Tucker family of Kitchener, Ontario sent two brothers, Bill and Fred, to aid in this cause. Only one returned.

In May 1941, Bill Tucker enlisted in the Canadian army. He had already seen many of his neighbours and friends board the train for various destinations and he had mixed feelings when he left for basic training. It was the first time he had left his hometown and he was excited at the prospect of traveling across Canada. On the other hand, he was leaving behind a family that needed him. His father died two years before leaving behind eight children, and many household responsibilities rested on his shoulders.

Bill was serving with the Fusiliers when his brother Fred, who was one and a half years younger than Bill, came of enlistment age. They thought it would be great if the brothers could be together. Bill talked to his officers and found Fred a position as a clerk. Bill thought that this would be a nice ‘safe’ office job for Fred. Both Tucker boys were thrilled to be together again, and Bill could keep better watch over his ‘kid brother’ Corporal Fred Tucker.

Though Fred appreciated having his older brother there to show him the ropes, Bill was not the best role model. He did not see the importance of shiny buttons, polished boots and other regulations that were, in his eyes, only in place to bolster the egos of commanding officers. As a result Bill was often punished with tasks such as peeling potatoes, washing the floor in the mess hall, or being restricted to barracks. Above all, Bill had the most difficulty with being Absent Without Leave (AWOL).

Bill loved his family very much, and when he was granted a few days leave he would always go home. But a couple of days with his family often turned into a week or more. He didn’t care if he was going to be in trouble when he went back, his philosophy was, “What are they going to do? Fire me?” A little extra time with his family was more important to him than a tongue lashing...
On 2 April 1945, the Canadians prepared to cross the Ijssel and Rhine Rivers in Holland in an effort to push the Germans back into Germany. The 2nd Canadian Infantry Brigade, including the Seaforth Highlanders and the Princess Patricia’s Canadian Light Infantry, was chosen to make the first attack across the Ijssel River. Bill was asked to take out a large machine gun that the Germans had on the road that ran across the top of the dike. They had been pinned down in the mud for days by that gun and could not advance until it was knocked out. Two or three other soldiers had tried before. That night Bill crawled as close to the edge of the river as he could and dug himself a small trench to provide good footing. He also dug a shelf into the bank at eye level and lined up the grenade on the shelf for easy grabbing. When he began to throw them he didn’t stop until every grenade was gone and the enemy guns were silent. He had managed to blow off the wheel of the support for the huge gun, and the troops could finally turn inland. One afternoon, Bill and some other soldiers stopped at a Dutch store to purchase a few snacks. The soldier told Bill that he was very sorry but he couldn’t believe it. He had last heard from Fred weeks before, still safe and far from the front. Bill never figured out why Fred, a clerk in the army, had been killed. Bill asked him how he knew that, and the man said that he was with him when he died. The soldier then led him to the barn when he was shot. Fred crumpled to the ground and the other soldier grabbed him and asked him if he was O.K. Fred replied “Ya, I’m fine” and then he died. Fred Tucker died on Monday, 27 April 1945, five days before the end of hostilities. He was just 23 years old.

The celebrations were short-lived. Just weeks after the war ended, Bill received a letter from his mother. It said that she had been sent a telegram informing her that Fred had been killed in action. She asked if he would try to find his grave and represent the family. Bill couldn’t believe it. He had last heard from Fred just weeks before, still safe and far from the front. Bill was determined to find his brother and write his mother telling her it was all a big mistake and that Fred was fine. He explained the situation to his Commanding Officer who allowed him to leave in search of his brother.

On his way there he ran into someone he knew from Kitchener who had served with the Perths. The soldier told Bill that he was very sorry but had in their packs. He learned how quickly life can change. In his lifetime, he instilled in his children the values of teamwork and helping others in need. He learned how quickly life can change and he savored every moment with the ones he loved. He knew first hand the horrors and
devastation that the war caused, and prayed that the atrocities that he witnessed would never again become a reality.

The people of Holland have never forgotten the brave Canadians who liberated their war torn country. In 1990 and again in 1995, Bill Tucker returned to the Netherlands with his wife Mary and sisters Rita, Mildred and Marie and her husband Noble to celebrate and remember. They were greeted with Canadian flags everywhere and banners hanging in the streets saying 'Welcome Canadian Heroes!' Strangers stopped veterans in the streets to shake their hand and say thank you. Bill always had a soft spot for the Dutch people because they were so good to him and because they wholeheartedly appreciated the help the Canadians gave when they needed it most. That bond must have been some consolation when Bill and his sisters visited their brother Fred’s grave in the quiet woods of Holten Canadian Military Cemetery.

Angela Fritz graduated with a BA in History from the University of Waterloo in 2001, with a particular interest in the Second World War. She wrote this article about her Grandfather and Great Uncle Fred to preserve this piece of her family history for future generations. Angela says, “I am very greatful to have heard these stories first hand from my Grandpa, and want to make sure that his story is never lost.”