PERMANENT ECHOES



# **High Flight**

Oh! I have slipped the surly bonds of earth
And danced the skies on laughter-silvered wings. Sunward
I've climbed and joined the tumbling mirth,
Of sun-split clouds and done a hundred things you have not dreamed of.
Wheel'd and soared and swung high in the sunlit silence.
Hov'ring there I've chased the shouting wind along And flung my eager craft through footless halls of air. Up, up the long delirious burning blue I've topped the wind swept heights with easy grace,
Where never lark or even eagle flew.
And, while with silent lifting mind
I've trod the high untrespassed sanctity of space,
Put out my hand and touched the face of God.

F/L John Gillespie McGee

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# PETER GARLAND

edited by Bill McGuire



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For Mom, Dad and Betty . . . and all the forgotten FighterCops.

## Foreword

There were thousands of us in the late fifties; the young men and women who operated radar on the isolated stations of Canada's Pinetree Line, stretching from Gander, Newfoundland to Holberg, Vancouver Island.

Most of us were kids, seventeen or eighteen-years-old. Some of us were high school graduates. All of us were graduates of Manning Depot, the Royal Canadian Air Force basic training base in St. Jean, Quebec that specialized in discipline and obedience. From Manning Depot most of us went to the Radar School in Clinton, Ontario where they turned out FighterCops - Fighter Control Operators. Scope dopes they called us. They rolled us out like cookies coming off an assembly line.

Why?

Because the Russians were coming. Any moment the sky would darken with the dreaded Red's missiles and bombers and we would be dust.

The politicians in the United States, busy hunting Communists under their beds, feared vast squadrons of bombers and missiles were poised and ready to leave the Motherland at any moment. They decided we must have sentinels and that we must have a way to repel and destroy the godless commies when they came. Canada's politicians agreed.

Businessmen on both sides of the border smelled big fat defence contracts.

So they begat N.O.R.A.D., the North American Air Defence Command, a unique international defence force.

If the worse happened, Canada was to be the battleground. And it almost did in '62, but Khrushchev blinked first in a staring contest with Kennedy.

The Prime Minister of Canada had a hole dug near Carp, just outside Ottawa, that he could duck into in case the twister came, like Auntie Em and the farmhands.

We were the Dorothys and the Totos. If the nuclear twister came, we couldn't make into the storm shelter. We couldn't think about that then. We were young and immortal and the world was ours.

Maybe you've passed one of these places, the radomes gleaming white. Most of them are deserted now, abandoned to to the weeds and snowdrifts as technology improved and the threat withered. On some former radar stations the base housing and administration and recreational buildings have been converted into self-supporting industrial villages and some into resorts or health farms. In Clinton, Ontario, the white radome under which so many trained, is still visible from the highway as you pass what is now an industrial park. In a small square in the centre of Clinton stands the old search radar antenna, removed from the radome and now a lasting tribute to the citizens and the airmen and airwomen whose lives had mingled briefly. When I lived it, it was 1958. Our cold war was still new. Our uniforms were new. Our rock'n'roll was new.

For the young Fighter Cops in the Royal Canadian Air Force, our freedoms were new.

Here's part of our story. Most of it really happened. It's a story that I've wanted to tell for a long time.

Peter Garland

#### Pinetree Line - 1958

I am 164055 Aircraftsman First Class John P. Hunter, Royal Canadian Air Force. Fighter Control Operator. Fighter Cop. I am six-foot-two, one-forty-five, insecure and with enough self-confidence to fill a thimble. I am 17 and skinny enough to walk through a harp.

The girls at the high school I left four months ago, when I was just J.P., say with my dark-rimmed glasses I look like Buddy Holly. Does Buddy Holly have acne, I wonder? I think I look like Mr. Peepers.

I have just spent 13 weeks at Manning Depot, Royal Canadian Air Force Station St. Jean, Quebec, learning, marching, ironing and shining while being gassed, yelled at and verbally abused by large men with power problems.

I am travelling to my first permanent base assignment with a fellow airman, a French-Canadian from Montreal whose family now lives in Windsor, Ontario. Gerry Dubois. He is a curly-haired eighteen-year-old, a small man with a short-person's cocky attitude. Gerry's old man works at "Ford's" - as Windsorites call it. My father is a Presbyterian minister in Sherbrooke, Quebec. He was glad to get me out of Sherbrooke High where I had been flunking badly and embarrassing everyone in the family. A preacher moves around and something has to give. My education gave, going from American education standards to Canadian. But here was the preacher's kid, recently released from St. Andrew's Presbyterian manse's gentle shelter into another curious, more earthy world. Gerry was an amateur con artist, recently turned pro. He's from English Canada and also speaks French. I'm from French Canada and only speak English. That's the way it is here. He was required to learn English at a basic training base in Quebec. All business was conducted in English in the R.C.A.F. After finishing that four-month course, he was then permitted to be gassed, yelled at and abused like the rest of us. It's a wonder his attitude was merely cocky. "I remember. Je me souviens." The Quebec licence plates tell a sad story.

We travelled from Montreal and were picked up in Quebec City at the train station by a bored base driver who had done this a hundred times too many. We shared the back of a van with boxes of spare parts and our suitcases and kitbags stacked around us. I stared out the window at the endless spruce and pine stands, the still, dark lakes and occasional cluster of houses, some painted in gaudy, almost carnival-like colours. Perhaps, I thought, it was some French-Canadian colour scheme to brighten the long, drab winters.

Dubois had volunteered to risk it back in Montreal and got us a bottle of Captain Morgan's at the liquor store which we made relatively short work of on the train. Even miles away from our basic training at R.C.A.F. Station St. Jean we worried that the dreaded Military Police would suddenly appear to whisk us back to the Crowbar Hotel, where we had both done a weekend recently for drinking under-age in a civilian bar. However, at 17, you could get soused in a military club as often as necessary. Just don't drink civilian booze. There was no bar on base for the recruits at basic training. I vaguely recalled hanging on and leaning out the opening between two cars on the train and feeling the cold exhilarating wind on my face as we sped into the black night. Both of us had slept in our uniforms and looked as if we were wearing blue wool accordions. Dubois had lost his hat, I was without a tie and we were both unshaven. We had been almost forcibly ejected from the train by a conductor, who I guess, felt strongly about passengers seeping through their stops. Or perhaps he was annoyed because we loudly sang "North Atlantic Squadron" at three a.m. "The cabin boy, the cabin boy the dirty little nipper...". Hopefully, the Montreal dowagers bound for Quebec City were not bilingual enough to catch the part about the skipper getting vulcanized.

In any case, the annoyed conductor was glad to see the end of us. The driver was waiting for us as we stumbled off the train, and there had been no time to search for the missing hat and tie. The ride north was quiet as we passed the gaudy houses with the Virgin Mary statues blessing us all from their inverted-bathtub shrines. We needed the blessings badly. I finally flamed out in the front seat with my head bouncing against the window. Dubois snored in the back.

R.C.A.F. Station Mont Apica is located 65 miles south west of Chicoutimi and 30 miles southeast of Lac St. Jean. From miles away we caught occasional glimpses of the three huge radomes as we crested hills. The driver, perhaps wanting some company, had roused us around noon with, "Take a look at yer new home eh, lads!"

The domes looked like three giant golf balls, with the centre one teed a little higher than the others, except there were no dimples on these golf balls. They were to come later when Buckminster Fuller's geodesic designs were used. These radomes were smooth, thick rubber kept up by air pressure, we were to learn.

Neither Dubois or I had ever seen radomes. We learned our trade without being exposed to the real thing. We had learned on scopes with revolving green traces connected to black boxes that made blips. We were both grads of R.C.A.F. Reserve Squadrons. Weekend Warriors. Dubois, when he lived in Montreal, had managed to pass the final Fighter Control Operator trade board examination at his reserve squadron without knowing much English. Enough to respond to drill commands, and smile and nod when spoken to during the summer course that paid teenagers \$400 for the summer months of 1957. Big dough then.

Gerry had mentioned though that one of the regular-force instructors was his older brother's friend. Ah, c'est ca. Must have been some creative exam marking there.

The domes were an impressive sight, I remember, gleaming white atop the steep green mountain on that bright spring day. They looked down on the collection of buildings on the base that was there solely to support them, to nourish them with bodies and grease pencils, paper and screwdrivers, tin arrows and headphones.

The van pulled through the gate and we asked the driver to drop us off at the barracks to clean up and scrounge a hat for Dubois and a tie for me before we went to the Administration building to sign in. We caught peeks into rooms (only four to a room!) and saw clothes and towels hung from bedposts and doorknobs and shoes and boots tossed into corners. Just like home. Certainly not like boot camp at St. Jean.

We fished our shaving gear out of our luggage and while we were washing struck up a conversation with a guy who told us *his* train story. He had arrived with just one shoe. He would lend us a hat and a tie. After we introduced ourselves, he told us he thought we were on his crew, having heard a rumour that two new guys were coming in from Manning Depot in St. Jean. Sure sounded like us.

He said we could leave our stuff in his room until the

Station Warrant Officer, a sort of den-mother to the troops, gave us a room assignment. Dubois looked at the guy a little sideways, but he looked pretty honest to me. Besides, stealing in the military is looked upon as right up there with boinking the Commanding Officer's wife at a Mess Dinner, or murder. You can do anything, but layoffa ma blue suede shoes. Do not shaft thy buddy. Anything else, almost. But not thy buddy. Bad. We went over to admin and checked in at the orderly room, picked up our clearance papers, a kind of identifying passport that must be stamped by all the various base departments that issue equipment so they can open a file on you. Then we went to see the Station Warrant Officer. The S.W.O., as we called him, was a Flight Sergeant and aside from being guardian of the junior ranks, was also base disciplinarian. Sort of a basic training hangover that would always follow us along the Pinetree Line causing headaches, and come to think of it, an occasional case of the shakes.

We had mistakenly assumed no one here cared about the discipline that had been drummed into our heads at basic training. We were almost right. Nobody cared except this one large yelling Flight Sergeant who asked many questions, always rhetorically.

"Youse guys have the nerve to sign on yer first transfer looking like that, fer Christ sake? Eh? You got pants that look like you slept in 'em, eh? Is that barf er somthin' on the shoes, eh?" I looked down at my shoes and decided to keep my head down, for the time being. What I saw was a blue battle-dress uniform that cried for a lecture and an iron, in that order.

"And you," he said pointing at Dubois, "Is that yer hat? Eh?" Dubois stammered something.

"So answer me, eh? Is that yer hat 'er what? I can't see yer ears fer Chrissakes, eh?" "No Flight," said Dubois. "Dis his not my 'at. My 'at was stole by a bunch of guy on de train to Quebec city."

Oh shit, I thought. We're into it now. There was a pause. He looked at me.

"That true, eh?"

To join a friend and leap into Bull Swamp, or not? Given three seconds, tops, to make that kind of decision has perplexed better men than 1.1 plunged. No. I put a toe in.

"Well, you see Flight, we were on the...that is...we had to...no...I saw a...", I blurted.

Dubois picked up, not the thread of the story for there was none, but the needle, and quickly sewed together a beauty.

"Flight, dis bunch of guy on de train start foolin' aroun' wit me han 'Unter 'ere, an took my 'at, an 'is tie, an' we don' do nottin, cause we know we punch hout de civvy we get in big shit."

The Station Warrant Officer's face reddened. I prepared for the worst. Three months in the air force and already I have a record for being too young in a civvy bar. Less than an hour on my first base and I'm in trouble again. I wondered if this guy knew about the deep stuff we got into in St. Jean? Does he know Dubois would lie to St. Peter in order to walk through the pearly gates? For the second time in less than a week I was saying to myself, Oh pleaseohpleaseohplease God, make this go my way and I'll never...

"Were these guys skiers? Eh? Were they a buncha' civvie skiers eh?" asked the flight sergeant. My mouth opened but nothing came out. He didn't require an answer.

"Cause you guys aren't the first ones to get pushed around by these frog jerks on the train eh! We had a guy come in a couple months ago with only one shoe, fer chrissakes eh? One shoe eh!"

Dubois, whose face reddened at the "frog" reference recovered quickly and we shook our heads sadly and looked at the floor.

"Next time," he said, "I'll get the army meatheads from Valcartier to meet the train when we got somebody on that train, eh? Specially if they're from basic trainin' eh?"

We nodded our heads fervently. He signed our clearances, gave us our room number (19) in Barrack block number three and told us to beat it to the supply section for a new hat and tie.

"Who lent you guys the hat and tie anyways eh?" We described our new washroom friend.

"Sounds like the poor dummy who had his shoe stole, eh?"

As we left, the Flight Sergeant was getting the switchboard to put him through to Val Cartier, home of the Army Provost Corps that ran the military penitentiary there. These guys were weaned-on-a-pickle just-passed-a-razor-blade mean. They made the guys who ran the guardhouse at St. Jean look like Liberace. God help the next guys who get drunk on the train to Quebec, we thought.

We went back to the barracks and scrounged an iron and pressed our pants.

## Up the Hill

The forty- passenger blue R.C.A.F. buses that took full crews to the radar site operated only for shift changes. Squat noisy four-byfours were used to bring mail, food and a few bodies up on a sort of shuttle basis, as the need required. They were almost twenty years old, without springs or padded seats and had many forward gears, the highest of which could reach forty miles per hour tops with the engine screaming like a banshee and belching brown smoke that filled the cab. They looked like iron bread trucks and rode like a toboggan and could probably go through miles of mud or snow four feet deep, if they had to. But they never had to, of course.

The road to the site was always the first plowed in the winter, and the busses never seemed to have a problem. When they did, they used the Snow Cat, sort of a giant snowmobile-type bus, and simply drove it up the swath cleared up the side of Mont Apica for the power and phone lines from the base below in the valley.

The four-by-fours were there simply because some bonehead in Ottawa confused Mont Apica's climate with that of Inuvik and his decision caused countless sore tail bones.

The road was gravel and switch-backed about four times on itself on a steep climb before reaching the summit and the three white globes atop their buildings. Dubois and I bounced and jostled in the back, peering out the small screened window in the back door down the steep mountain side at the base shrinking far below.

We passed the telecommunications centre with its antenna array for UHFWHF air-ground-air talk and then, around another switchback, the power plant that supplied electricity to the base and the radar site. It took me awhile to figure out why the power plant was up the hill. It's because, unlike the provincial highway that ran by the base, the Department of National Defence owned the road up the hill. We could guard it.. If it was beside the highway, the Russkies could send in a horde of Reds, (recent defectors at Gander, Newfoundland, I guessed), and put them on the Voyageur Bus Line to Roberval disguised as happy French-Canadian shoppers. Then, all singing Alloo-wetta, they could lob hand grenades from the bus windows and blow up the power plant. This would happen as we stared intently at our scopes, waiting for the expected dreaded bombers and missile attack. Tricky guys, those Reds.

We passed a gate at the bottom of the hill that was rusted permanently in the up position, so I figured the Russians would have to give us plenty of notice on the old commando raid so we could get the meatheads to fix the gate and guard it. Of course! That's it. They'd wait for us to get prepared! Sure, and maybe, if their timing was just a little off, they'd arrive just in time to be blown to dust by one of their own missiles.

We were to discuss this contorted logic occasionally when the rusty gate had to be manned by one or more of us and we were issued ancient Sten guns and sent out to guard the radar site. Then, a bunch of Army grunts from Petawawa with sooty faces and dressed in black coveralls would see if they could do a break-andenter on the building. This was to simulate the Russians suffering brain damage and, forgetting their own approaching bombers, go for a visit to ground zero. We arrived at the main building, the one under the huge centre dome, stumbled out and I slammed the door on the hot metal box on wheels; maybe a little too hard as the driver laid some gravel on us as he goosed it a bit to head back down.

An elderly civilian security guard sat in a windowed office just inside the door. He buzzed the door to let us in, and we handed him our clearance papers. He squinted myopically at the names and handed us two clip-on badges that said OPERATIONS-RESTRICTED-(TEMPORARY), and two forms to fill out, and said we'd get permanent badges soon. He buzzed the inner door and we walked in and followed him up two flights of stairs and through a door marked OPS.

We entered an ante-room off the main operations room. On the wall was a bulletin board with shift schedules, daily routine orders and small signs advertising lost and found items and a longpast party in the Airman's Club. A hallway led off this area with small offices, one of which had been converted to be used as a coffee lounge. We heard a female squeal in alarm and then dissolve into high-pitched laughter. We walked through the main door into the Ops room.

"Holy shit!" Dubois and I said in unison.

In our tiny Aircraft Control & Warning Reserve Squadrons back home, we had nothing on this scale. We'd been in a miniature, a model radar station. Here was a room 50-by-50 yards with three storeys to the ceiling. On the back wall a giant "tote board" rose from floor to ceiling. Hundreds of horizontal black slats lined the board, and from them hung metal plaques displaying air defence information. If stripped of plaques it would have looked like a huge closed black Venetian blind.

Behind the board, I was to learn later, were multi-level catwalks that our fellow FighterCops, wearing

headphones, walked and climbed posting information as they received it. As I looked at the totes, the now-outdated weather for Montreal, (call letters UL,) was being scooped off, and the latest posted.

Fifteen-hundred feet in overcast with fog, visibility one mile. Not so hot in Montreal.

In front of the totes was the horizontal plotting board, a huge map of our coverage area divided into three even sections, each as big as the side of a moving van. There were narrow aisles between sections in which plotters could move to track aircraft.

There were two airwomen and one airman and they all looked very bored, slumped in tin folding chairs. One held a long pole, a "ladies aid" used to move arrows and plaques that were out of reach. She rose from her chair and using the pole, moved a white arrow from third in the line of three to the front to a new azimuth and range position, and pushed the info plaque alongside. A hoot of laughter erupted from up on the dias. The airwoman first looked up at the dias and then to the plotting board, blushed and put one hand over her mouth. She glanced up at a window that overlooked the Ops room on the third floor and shook a fist at someone , then scooped the info plaque quickly off the plotting board. The windows along that wall were dark. Someone stopped laughing long enough to say something to her and she put a new "track number" on the plaque and put it back in its place, casting angry glances up at her supervisor. He worked on the Ops Dias.

The dias was against the wall opposite the tote boards, facing both the totes and the plotting boards, a stage about four feet tall extending the width of the room. The Chief Ops Officer, the crew chief, the Aircraft Identification section, the forward tellers and others, most of whom now read and smoked and had their feet up on something, usually worked up there. The windows high above the dias were large and tilted out from the top to give a commanding view of the room. An officer stood behind one, looking down at us, smiling and smoking. The plotting board reflected on the window around him.

"You guys lookin' fer sumpin?" asked a chuckling corporal holding a Mickey Spillane in one hand and a cigarette in the other. He was fat, his belly sagging over his belt. His mousy-brown hair was slicked back with more than a dab of Brylcreem and he'd been through a few acne wars, with one angrily in progress. His face looked like he played goalie on a dart team.

"Yes Corporal. We're here to get our clearance papers signed so we can..." I began.

"You guys in from the radar school in Clinton?" he said.

"No, St. Jean. Basic. Could you tell us where to ..."

"Not some more reserve weenies," he said, letting his eyes roll up. "Go up to the C OPs O's office. That stands for Chief. Operations. Officer. Okay Kiddies?" That got a laugh from the other people.

"It's on the second floor. They'll give you your crew assignment. So where you kiddies from?"

"Sherbrooke, Quebec," I said pointing to myself.

"Windsor, Hontario Corp-o-RAL!" said Dubois.

"The name is Barber, froggie," he said glancing at the other people, "but you can call me Corp-o-RAL!" Then he grinned. The dias giggled and hooted again. I glanced at the still blushing airwoman plotter and caught her eye. She had an exasperated look. I gave her a small wave and she stared for a second, returned it and I walked out followed by an infuriated Dubois, insulted again.

"Careful on the stairs children!" he shouted after us to more guffaws.

"Hasshole!" said Dubois as we walked up the

staircase to the office of the Chief Operations Officer.

"He was only kidding, Gerry", I said, knowing Dubois was probably right.

"I want to 'ear him speak French has good has hi speak henglish, the hasshole!"

The C Ops O was a Squadron Leader, a smallish man wearing a mustache, in his shirt sleeves with tie loosened. His tunic hung on a rack in the corner. It carried pilot's wings and and a load of ribbons from WW II.

"The one that was in color", we teenaged military boys and girls used to call it, having experienced the last two wars only in the movies. He did not act like the Squadron Leader we'd visited in St. Jean to be sentenced for our underage boozing crime. He actually stood up as we came in, escorted into his office by some Leading Aircraftsman (L.A.C.) who handed him two files. We saluted. He shook our hands and welcomed us, asking where we were from, and what were our first impressions of Mont Apica. Dubois was still fairly pissed off at the good Corporal downstairs, so I mumbled something about liking what we had seen so far and seeing a real Ops room was a big shock. He took a minute to read our files.

"Both you young fellows are from reserve training squadrons, then?" he said. We both nodded in the affirmative.

"Well, you've got some catching up to do. I'm afraid what you have learned is a trifle primitive compared to what goes on in the real world of aircraft control and warning, gentlemen. But I'm sure you're both up to it."

He seemed to stare for a moment at Vanier's hat, as the wedgie teetered on his ears.

"Very well, then. My rules are simple. Do your job and stay out of trouble and we'll do just fine. Good luck, uh, Dubois and Hunter," he said glancing down at the files. "L.A.C. Wilmot!" he yelled. A head appeared around the doorframe.

"Yes sir?"

"Give these two guys their crew assignments and a quick tour and grab me a coffee on your way back up, please."

"Right away sir! Yes sir!" said Wilmot.

"Hope you enjoy your stay here, gentlemen," he said. We saluted and walked out, into Wilmot's cubby-hole office. Wilmot was a Fighter Cop assigned to work in the boss' office, and he looked the part; creased and polished in all the right places as he scurried over behind his desk gesturing impatiently for us to sit down. We handed him the paper work the old Commissionaire security guard had given us. His framed diploma from Radar School in Clinton hung on the wall behind him. Hardly a huge accomplishment compared to the ex-Spitfire pilot next door with the Distinguished Flying Cross, but he's proud to be where he is, I thought. He's exceeding his expectations. Nevertheless, this guy had nerd written all over him, or so I thought. Was he here because he was good at scope-doping, or was he here because he was good at brown-nosing? My first impression was that if the man responsible for assigning people to work in the Squadron Leader's office looked down recently, he noticed Wilmot shining his shoes.

"Soooo, you guys came in from St. Jean, eh?" said the L.A.C., looking down at the files and neatly snaring a booger from his right nostril.

"Did you run into a Corporal Hollander there?" Indeed we had I replied, watching him ball it up between his thumb and forefinger, then flick it into the wastepaper basket behind him. Dubois was about to say something but Wilmot got there first.

"Geez, what a great guy! He was our course drill

instructor and we got to be real buddies, as much as you can with a Corporal, like, in basic, y'know."

That fairly well pegs this guy, I thought. Corporal Hollander was generally regarded as a sadistic son-of-a-bitch who took great pleasure in making our lives at basic training as miserable as he could. Running around a hanger fifty times holding a rifle above your head in full dress until you fainted in the summer heat was small potatoes to Hollander.

"Tabarnac!" said Dubois under his breath.

"Says here you guys are on crew three. The Flight Sergeant is a real bugger. Matter of fact, MOST of the crew are buggers. The only one I ever got along with was the Flight Commander when I was on it. Wasn't for him I wouldn't be here," he said. I bet he misses your shoe-shine jobs, I thought, but he doesn't miss you.

"What shift is crew three on right now?" I asked.

"Ummm...lemme see," he said checking out a schedule on the wall behind him. "Oh you lucky stiffs! You're on days off! Just started today!"

That was a bright spot in what had been a long, long day so far.

Dubois and I grinned at each other and at the wimpy Leading Aircraftsman Wilmot.

"Okay. I should take you guys on the ol' five cent tour like my boss said. Let's go," he said rounding the desk and heading for the door.

We climbed the stairs to the top floor, walked down a hall and through a door with a sign that said "Radar Report" and entered a darkened L-shaped room, with windows on both of the front walls that looked down into the cavernous Ops room where we had been earlier. In front of the window on one side stood four radar-scope consoles, one of which was manned. The green revolving trace put a spooky tinge to the operator's face. In front of the other windows were two height-finder scopes, neither of which had an operator. At the corner, facing the window was a fifth radar console with a corporal sitting, reading something.

"Coupla new guys," said Wilmot. "I won't bother you for long".

"I hope not Wilmot, you numbskull", said the darkened figure that was staring at the scope.

"Listen, I don't have to take tha..." Wilmot started, but the corporal at the scope interrupted.

"What crew did they put you guys on? You on crew two?" he asked.

"Crew tree" said Dubois.

"Sonofabitch! Who makes these crew assignments? That you Wilmot? We're workin' four bodies short on this crew already! I got two people stuck in radar report for a whole shift fer Chrissakes! You'd screw up a two-car funeral, Wilmot, I swear!" said the corporal who now stood.

Wilmot quickly stepped back one pace, then put his hands on his hips and said, "They got six people transferred on crew three, Corporal Dutton. They will all be leaving within the next month. Your crew status is not below any critical level. If you have a complaint, please take it to the C Ops O, who approves my crew assignments."

The radar op's eyes never left the scope as he said,

"You're a major suck, Wilmot. I hope we never get so short they have to put YOU back on crew, 'cause with my luck, bad and none, you'd be workin' in here with me." Almost in the same breath he flicked his headphone on and said quietly,

"Charlie, put Mike three-two-five at one two one at 88. Put a fade on Mike three-two-one. Ask Ident if they want a D.R., okay? He's probably landed at Bagtown, anyways." Hey, I got that, I thought to myself. He just gave the plotter the compass bearing and range of track number 325. Track 321 had faded from his scope. He wanted her to ask Identification if they wanted dead-reckoning (position estimates after a track fades from radar) on Track 321. He thought that the aircraft had landed at Bagotville. Basic training didn't kill that many brain cells, I thought.

The corporal showed us around. We'd seen the scopes before. Just the setting was new and the atmosphere a little more serious: most of the time.

When we moved over to the guy operating the scope, he introduced himself. Pritchard, he said his name was.

"Call me Pritch, just don't call me late fer dinner, Okay?" He asked what room we had in the barracks, where were we from, said he had four months and eleven days left at Mont Apica but who was counting and he was waiting for a transfer overseas. Who wasn't, I replied, and I asked him what caused the earlier uproar with the plotter down in the Ops room.

"Oh geez. Barber and the corporal on Ident put me up to that. The plotter is Charlie Graham, the dark-haired one down there, see her? " We nodded.

"Not bad lookin' huh? She hasn't been here too long and she's real innocent, y'know? So the I.D. assigns me the track number when I got an initial plot, and I tell it to the plotter. They put it up on the board, and who's ever on totes puts it up there. The tote was wise but kept his mouth shut. So I.D. says, 'Pritch, the track number was Poppa Romeo One Charlie kilo!'" He guffawed. "It looks like P-R-I-C-K! Jesus! It was on there for like twenty friggin' minutes an' she never caught on!" He giggled and stared at the scope.

"Well Pritchard," said Wilmot, "Perhaps now when she sees you she'll think of that word. I know I do."

Not a bad shot, I thought.

Wilmot was then requested to go forth and multiply by both of the Radar room regular occupants. He did and we followed him down the hall to the Duty Controllers/ Ops B's office. The name of the game was surveillance (Radar reporting and plotting) and fighter interceptor controlling (aircraft control) and warning, of course. Look Dick! See the Russian bombers way up north? Quick Jane! Warn your neighbours laterally and to the south! Quick Dick and Jane! Intercept and shoot down as many as you can, hoping that adjacent Aircraft Control and Warning units will also do their share! Poor Puff! Place head between legs and kiss it goodbye Puff, because the missile will be here any minute now!

The Duty Controller was a Flight Lieutenant; his assistant (the Ops 'B') a Leading Aircraftsman. They both had their feet up on the wide desk, books in their laps, the flight-louie smoking a pipe. They glanced up as we looked in, then returned to whatever they'd both been reading. A quiet day. If radar report picked up something within the Canadian Air Defence Identification Zone (CADIZ) that the identification section couldn't put a handle on after a flight plan search, it would be designated an "unknown" and this duty controller would scramble a CF-100 or two out of Bagotville and then control and vector the fighter to intercept the turkey and identify it. Weather permitting. The CF 100 All-Weather Fighter was a nice name for shoulder flashes, politicians and civvies, but pilots, controllers and fighter cops knew better. Excessive amounts of wind, rain, fog, snow or sleet and they parked the "clunks", unknown or no unknown. The unknowns were always lost bush pilots, the occasional screwed-up, over-thepole-airline flight or geese. The Red hordes, flvin' down to Cuba for a little R & R in the sun occasionally wandered inside the coastal boundary off

Newfoundland, and the Gander troops would scramble on them. Each crew had about five fighter controllers, all reporting in for the real thing, air defence exercises, or to get their quota of practice intercepts. P.I.'s, we called them.

Nothing was happening now. Wilmot explained that there had been a load of practice intercepts that morning but all the fighters R T B'd (returned to base) about noon. A Squadron Mess dinner in Bagotville was on for this evening and most controllers who had been invited had already gone.

We checked out the intercept room anyway, with its rows of unoccupied scopes and watched the airman working "monitor".

He listened to certain common UHF/VHF frequencies and gave Strategic Air Command and Transport Command overflights weather info and navigational fixes if they asked for it. He was hunched over the scope, the pale green trace in its twelve-second sweeps giving him that witchy complexion, and he wrote something on the scopeface with a black grease pencil. He wore a double headset.

He stepped on a pedal-switch that put him on the air and said, "Roger Blackbird one-niner, this is Scabbard control, winds for angels thirty now two-four-zero at 25, temp, minus 10. We have you fifty-six northwest of Bagtown headed zero- one-two, angels 30. Approx 350 knots. No strangers. Yankees two, Boston no score bottom of the eighth. You read? Over." I mentally translated: "Angels" referred to altitude, so he'd just given him the wind speed and direction plus the temperature at 30,000 feet. His present position was 56 miles northwest of Bagotville headed north-north east. "No strangers" meant no other aircraft flying in his vicinity. Then he gave him the ball score. That's something we didn't pick up in the reserves. He listened, then cracked a smile and said "Roger Blackbird one-niner. Scabbard control standing by on guard, over." He looked at us. "That's Mike 325 that's down there on the board now," he said pointing down through the window at the plotting board. As we looked down, Charlie got up and leaned across the plotting board, pushing the red metal arrow and the plaque that read M 325 to its position northwest of Bagotville, heading northeast as she got its new position from Pritchard in radar report. She had removed her uniform jacket and rolled up her shirtsleeves. Her blue shirt filled out nicely, I couldn't help but notice.

"He had nasty name down there," chuckled the airman working monitor, nodding down through the glass at the plotting board, "...but he sounds like a nice guy! He's one of those Blackbird jobs outa Plattsburgh. Long range, high altitude photo aircraft. Sometimes we're forbidden to put the height-finder on' em. Top secret ceiling. But not this guy. Must be a training flight 'er somethin'. Smile, you're on candid camera!" He laughed as he peered down at the lovely plotter who'd gone back to her chair at the foot of the dias.

"Ha! Poor Charlie. Those guys can be ignorant sometimes." Dubois asked him where he got the ball score and was told the guys down at the telecom site had the ballgame on the radio; a Boston station. It helps when you have a 100-foot antenna, he said. He said the aircraft had it tuned in until 15 minutes ago, but finally flew out of the stations range. We laughed and shook our heads. Those crazy Yanks! Baseball, motherhood, apple pie and spy planes! God Bless America ! Wilmot took us down to the Ops room. We climbed the four stairs up and walked along slowly as Wilmot pointed out the various positions there, now unmanned. There were C Ops O, Crew Chief, Identification, Forward Tellers (who advised adjacent stations of approaching flights and kept Command headquarters in the picture) and many seats for assistants.

Wilmot started to say something and Corporal Barber said loudly, "You guys listen to him, you'll be fucked-up for life!"

The Sergeant crew chief mumbled at Barber to watch his mouth. I glanced at Charlie the pretty plotter, but she had been busy with M 325 at a new plot, and had missed Barber's latest contribution. The other airwoman had heard though, and sat looking at her feet, blushing.

Wilmot finished what he had to say and we all left the Ops room and went into the coffee lounge. Wilmot got the Squadron Leader's coffee and left, and Dubois and I sat down in two leather chairs with wooden arms. A redheaded airwoman and two L.A.C.'s looked at us and said, "Hi". We hi'd them back and put our heads on the backs of the chairs and slouched in the really beat position. It had been a long day. Might as well wait for the shift change bus now, Wilmot had told us. It was three-thirty in the afternoon. Evening shift would be here in fifteen minutes.

"If youse guys want some coffee, help yerselves!" said Airwoman Redhead perkily.

"Tanks", said Dubois getting up and heading for the pots at one end of the room. I followed, more out of a desire to not answer any more stranger's questions than for a coffee.

"Ooooo, a French fella! I LIKE French fellas!" said the redhead. She had alot of bobby-pins stuck in the back of her hairdo, I noticed.

"Maudit Tabernac!" said Dubois again under his breath as he poured black coffee into a mug.

"Are you French too?" she asked, looking at me.

"No ma'am. Hardly speak the language, even though I'm from Sherbrooke, Quebec. Dubois here's French and he's from Ontario." "Oh well, isn't that somethin'?" she replied. "And you called me ma'am! Ain't that sumthin'? I'm just a little oF airwoman!"

The other two guys smirked at us and looked at the ceiling.

"My name is Rosie. Are you guys assigned to this crew?" she asked. Her tunic was undone, and she'd sprung a shirt button under pressure. Cathy's red hair was clipped short and an extraordinary number of bobby-pins gleamed in the light. A helluva lot.

Dubois slurped at his coffee and then said, "We 'ave been hassign to crew tree. Dere hon days off. We just doin' de clearance."

"Oooo! Aren't you lucky! What a great crew! They know how to have a party. The bozos on this crew don't do nothin'", she wailed, "except for these two peckerheads!"

With that, she emmitted a screech and the two goofy airmen guffawed and elbowed each other. Dubois and I exchanged startled glances. "I'll see youse guys in the Airmen's Club! I'll letcha buy me a beer, okay?" she said.

"Dat soun' lak a 'elluva idee," said Dubois, now appreciating the gap in her blue shirt. "Hi'll buy you a pair of beer!"

She followed his gaze, said, "Whoops!" and without blushing held the gap together, smiling at us all the while.

"Cute. A pair of beer!" she giggled.

Another airwoman stuck her head around the door.

"Hey Rosie! The bus is up. How's yer bird?"

"Better'n most, Frankie. How's yers?" Guffaws all around.

Instantly overcome by a huge wave of horniness, I sat and thought of ice and Corporal Hollander and old ladies on brooms for thirty seconds before I stood up.

Rosie. Red hair. Charlie pretty plotter. I think I'm

liking it here already.

We jounced down the hill in a forty-passenger bus that seemed luxurious after the shock-absorberless truck and finished clearances at the recreation centre, motor pool and finally the supply section where we got our bedding, a new tie for me and a hat for Dubois.

We dropped the paperwork off at the orderly room after clearing the accounts section and went to our new home, Barrack Block Three.

#### **Down the Hill**

"Well, it was too good to last, I guess" said the guy laying on the cot in room 19. "Three months with only me and Frog in here. Jesus H! Who are you guys anyways?" he asked, sitting up. He had a friendly face under a black brush-cut.

I introduced us and he told us his name - Bruce McLennon. He was from some place named Port Stanley, Ontario. Seemed like a nice guy, first impression and all. We wheeled our kitbags and suitcases down the hall from the guys' room and Bruce told us we had the two cots closest to the windows.

"Sorry, but first come first serve. The friggin' blinds don't work so hot, and when yer sleepin' after midnights the light shines on those two pits next to the windows", said our new roommate. "Until Burford and Smitty got transferred I had to sleep on that bed of nails ", he said pointing to the bed that held my luggage.

"G-g-good thing you worked in radar report Brucie. You didn't need all that much s-s-s-sleep after a g-graveyard!"

A very short man walked in and threw a towel and some shaving gear into his cupboard. "Are we b-b-back to being c-ccozy again?" He sounded like a short white staccato Satchmo.

His real name was Wayne, but everyone called him Frog because of his stuttered croaks.

Bruce said, "Boys, meet Frog Matthews. Frog, this

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here is John and Gerry."

"N-n-nice ta meetchas," says Frog.

"Hi," says I.

"Alio," says Dubois. "Ow da 'ell are you? Seem like we got two frog in da same room at da same time. Tabernac!"

We all laughed. These guys were good heads. That first impression stuff has something to it. It turned out that crews roomed together and they were crew #3. Bruce got a mickey of rum from somewhere deep in his locker and passed it around. In spite of the previous night's drunken adventure on the rails, it went down fairly well.

We did the shave, shower and shampoo bit and then put our stuff away, hanging and placing everything in boot-camp fashion, stacking socks and aligning boots and shoes. Bruce hooted, "Hey! Where the hell you guys think you are? Basic?" We both looked at each other's closet and laughed like hell. I messed his up and he messed mine. Frog said now we could stay. We were a long way from drill instructors, but old habits die hard.

"W-w-who was your course d-d-discip?" rasped Frog.

"Corporal Hollander", I replied.

"Holy Jesus! I had him! If the world ever needs an enema, the tube goes right into Cpl. Hollander! I hated that son of a bitch!" said Bruce.

"You han' mos' of da free worl'!" said Dubois. The four of us headed for the airmen's club, reminded anew how glad we were to be away from shining boots and marching and tear gas and jail and Corporal Hollander.

I thought about short red hair and undone buttons and how's yer bird, and having a legal beer with your buddies on days off. I liked R.C.A.F. Station Mont Apica.

## The Airmen's Club

The late afternoon sunlight lasered those God-beams through the cigarette smoke that shrouded basement windows in the club, putting tiny spotlights here and there. There were about twenty people around the bar and four tables were full, some playing euchre, most just joking or bitching about work or watching the others. The various trades hung together in small chatty cliques, especially early in the evening.

Later the airmen would mix when shoptalk had been exhausted and a few beers had gone down. Attitude adjustment, we called it.

Regardless of their trade, the airwomen sat or stood together in small mixed groups sipping beer and talking, smiling and sometimes watching the airmen furtively. I spotted Charlie the embarrassed plotter and waved at her. She nodded back with a small smile. The redhead didn't seem to be around yet.

Dubois and I got a beer and looked around a bit. The club was a long, narrow room downstairs from the dining room with the bar at one end. To the side of the bar, in a separate small room, was the "snakepit", with a couch and a beer-machine, a converted pop dispenser, for thirsty shift workers after hours. The Sergeants' and Officers' clubs backed off the Airmen's club, with their dining rooms right above.

All the messes were in one building, with kitchens and dining rooms on the main level and bars below

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forming the hubs.

A small games room was off to the side of the main room in the Airmen's club with darts and a pool table. Two guys were in there shooting a little snooker. One of them was the guy who lent us the hat.

"There's the other poor bastard that had to put up with those civvy skiers," I said to Dubois. We laughed.

Upstairs, next to the messhall, there was a TV lounge with a black and white Motorola and some leather couches and chairs and maple coffee tables with huge dark-brown glass ashtrays. Watching Wild Bill Hickock in French on the Chicoutimi channel were a couple of airwomen and one guy.

" Attendez Moi, Beel!" hollered Jingles as he jumped on his cheval.

Dubois hit the games room to shoot some pool with McLennon and Matthews, asking if I'd be a fourth. I was distracted by many things in my youth, but pool was not one of them. I declined the invitation. Now, Charlie the plotter could distract me, I thought, if I could work up the guts to speak to her. Or even the redhead from up the hill, if she showed up.

"What can I do ya for?" asked the barkeep. "You

new?"

"Yes," I answered. "My friend and I just came in from basic in St. Jean."

"I kinda thought you didn't look familiar", he said, putting out his hand. "The names Bob Martin. Folks call me Bobby."

We shook and I introduced myself and ordered a Black Label. "Hey Mabel! Get off the table. The quarters for the beer, right?" said Bobby, smiling. "You don't want another Red Cap?" he said looking at my empty. Your first few minutes as a legal drinker can bring on some indecision.

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"Hey Mabel, please. Is this your full-time job"? "No way! My trade's M.E. driver," said Bob. "Motor equipment. I was lucky to get this bar, part-time. Fella could die from boredom and poverty in the Officers'. Jesus what deadheads!"

Someone dropped a quarter in the Wurlitzer Rockola.

"Be bop a lula she'sa ma baybee. Be bop alula ah don' mean maybe....!" bopped Gene Vincent from the jukebox.

The Airmen's messhall had emptied some more bodies into the club, and they came up to the bar, the guys kibitzing and goosing each other and flippin' for beers, the airwomen smiling, talking to each other, hanging back a bit.

"I saw you up the hill. You new?" asked someone behind me. I turned and looked and inwardly jumped, immediately conscious of two zit clusters on my forehead and nose and that my button-down shirt and black chinos were two sizes small from the wrinkles. Funny, it didn't seem to matter when we left the barracks.

"Yes. New. In...uh...today," said smooth-talker to Charlie the plotter.

Her black hair was tied back, her eyes blue and her face beautiful with high cheekbones on which rested a pair of those squinchy cats-eye glasses with black frames. Smiling and pretty full lips held a touch of lipstick. She had a kind of calming, peaceful face I remember thinking.

"Well, my name is Charlene Graham. Everyone calls me Charlie so you might as well. Welcome to Mont Apica, um...?"

"I'm John, uh...John Hunter," I said and then took a slurp of beer, half of which went in my mouth. The rest ran down my chin. I felt my entire face turn the colour of the zit clusters. Relax stupid, I told myself.

"Whoops! Nervous in the service?" chuckled

Charlie as I coolly wiped my chin with my shirtsleeve.

"Sorry...I...ah...it....ah...looks like a nice base," I stammered. "How long have you been here, Charlie?"

"Oh, about two months. I was on course 5748 in St. Jean and then Clinton for ten weeks. I kinda' like it except for the nebbishes on my crew."

"Nebbishes?" I asked, lighting a smoke.

"You know. Drips. Like that Corporal Barber this afternoon up there and the dirty, track number. What children! Lord!" she said, smile gone now. A crease appeared between her eyebrows.

"They were maybe just fooling around a bit?" I offered.

"If they did that stuff to one of the guys there'd be hell to pay, 1\*11 tell you that!" she shouted above Gene who "...mah baby love!"-ed one last time, finishing as Charlie hit the "hell to pay line" and her voice carried over a sudden silence in the club.

"C'mon Charlie! Smile! I thought you could take a joke," said someone at the table behind us. Corporal Barber and Pritchard the scope operator sat looking up at us, grinning and smoking. The jukebox needle hissed into Jerry Lee's thumpin' piano; "Cumonova baby, whole lotta shakin' goin' on"!

"Don't you embarrass me again Barber you bugger, or so help me I'll go see the Flight Commander!" said Charlie, shouting over the jukebox and pointing a finger at the smirking Barber. She now had everyone's undivided attention. Didn't seem to bother her. Her face now was anything but calm.

"Nobody has to take that! 'Course I'd expect it from you, Barber, but not you Pritch! And you the President of the Mess Committee too," she said looking at Pritchard. "Some buddy."

Pritchard, recently elected to the senior position on the

committee that ran the Airmen's club, looked sheepish and shrugged, and mumbled into his beer.

"That's CORPORAL Barber to you plotter, and the Flight Commander doesn't give a shit about a little joke, so cool yer jets, fer chrissakes!" Charlie awarded the Corporal her favourite wave for that one. At least the finger had a manicured nail. Barber laughed and drank his beer.

"They've been doing stuff like that since I got here," she said as we turned back to the bar. "You oughta hear about the crap some of the other girls put up with. I wouldn't work totes on this crew for love nor money. Not with a skirt on, anyway. And half of them have six pairs of hands, I swear. God."

I caught Bobby's eye and he plunked down another Black for me, picking up a quarter from the change I'd left on the bar.

"I'm sorry they give you a hard time," I said. "Do they treat some of the new GUYS like that too?" She laughed. "Well, most of the guys don't wear skirts, but I think I know what you mean." I felt my face redden. "You're blushing! How cute! To answer your question: no, just stupid stuff for a short time maybe," she said. "They don't let up on the airwomen, though. One requested her release about two weeks ago. Got out and went home to Winnipeg. Couldn't take it anymore."

Some laughter welled up behind us, from Barber's table.

"Hey Charlie! Tell everyone about the most exciting track number you got today!" yelled Barber, a cigarette dangling from grinning lips.

"We ain't fakin', whole lotta shakin' goin' on!" sang the Killer to the again-quiet room. Then someone dropped a beer glass to derisive hoots. Bobby swore and handed the mop over the bar to someone. The commotion

continued for a few seconds and I opened my mouth to say something to her. Her face was very red. But Barber came at her again, "Whaddya say Charlie baby? See somethin' you like on the plottin' table this aft?"

Charlie, now livid, turned to Barber, her lips pressed together and her eyes wide. At that very moment a number of things began to happen.

The Orderly Corporal, fresh from selling meal-tickets in the messhall, slouched in. It was a dreary job. Orderly Corporal was something you got about every three months. Like diahrrea. It was a job that required you to turn in your peers, if necessary. You made sure nobody was "rowdy" in the club and that everyone cleared the place by one in the morning. If they got "rowdy" and wouldn't leave, you were supposed to file a report with the Station Warrant Officer, who then dealt out punishments.

Although "rowdiness" and hanging around the club after hours wasn't exactly rampant, any Orderly Corporal with the slightest bit of sense would think twice about even reporting a five-alarm brawl at 3 a.m. involving naked people throwing jello.

It was best to show up just after everyone had left, then file a report. It made life after Orderly Corporal so much nicer.

The Orderly Corporal now approached the bar carrying his roll of tickets and his tin lock-box under his arm, having sold some civilian employees their 35-cent meal tickets for supper.

So, take a picture of this. As he neared Barber's table, Charlie chose that moment to fling her beer in the Corporal's face, screeching, "Leave me alone! You...you bastard!" Barber sat shocked for two or three seconds, then stood quickly and sent his chair scooting back into the Orderly Corporal, whose tickets and tin box hit the

floor, scattering change and one dollar bills everywhere. Immediately, forty hands hit the deck to scoop Her Majesty's coin of the realm. Barber's face, dripping with suds, was also quite lividly red as he returned the favour and turfed a beer at Charlie with his right hand and stepped forward and smacked her hard across the face with his left. Her glasses went flying. I bent down and picked them up. One of the arms was bent.

"You smartass bitch, I'll...." was all he managed to say and he was raising his hand for a second shot at her when the crib board caught him just above the right eyebrow. It caromed off Barber's head and bounced along the bar clearing off three beer glasses and bouncing at Bobby's feet behind the bar.

Barber dropped like a sack of door knobs, blood squirting.

I had jumped back, moving farther down the bar when the beer started to fly.

Did this happen very often?

"That'll costya' Wilmot!" yelled Bobby at the ace who had thrown the crib-board.

Bodies slowly rose from coin-gathering to look at Barber's crumpled form and then to Wilmot, who stood behind a corner table staring, white-faced, still holding cards in his left hand.

"What the hell you do that for Wilmot? Jesus. You're euchred now for sure, eh!"

"He's an ignorant asshole," said Wilmot quietly, and left. All eyes followed his departure, then stared at others with disbelief, re-evaluating the wimpy Wilmot.

Charlie, soaked with beer, stood holding her cheek, not crying, just looking down at Barber who lay at her feet.

"I want every penny back right now!" yelled the Orderly Corporal, who after some initial contusion and

glances from bloodied body to missing meal ticket money, was finally getting his priorities straight.

Charlie was now crying. She asked the bartender for a clean towel, and wiped her face and hair. I gave her the glasses.

"I...uh think they got damaged, Charlie."

"That's O.K. Thanks." The beautiful blue eyes were rimmed with red now. "I've got another pair." She dropped the broken pair in her purse and took an identical pair out of a brown leather glasses case. Be prepared, I thought. Then she knelt down beside the kayoed Barber and pressed the towel to his bleeding head. A Bible story came to my minister's-son mind, seventeen years of attendance rearing its pious head.

He moaned and tried to open his eyes, showing whites and eliciting groans from the audience, who now gathered in a circle staring down at him.

Bobby grabbed some ice and handed it to me and I gave it to Charlie. She wrapped it with the now-crimson towel and pressed it to the cut, a beaut that definitely needed a bunch of stitches; no doubt about it. I felt slightly detached, as if I were watching a show on TV. Suddenly everyone was talking loudly at once, trying to get a better look at Barber.

"Served'im right, hittin' a woman!" and, "Who's the chickenshit that threw the crib board?" and "Where's a Med A? Barber's cut!" and "Brownie's a Med A.! In the TV lounge! Somebody holler for him!"

The Medical Assistant, watching Le Wild Beel, was summoned. McLennon, Matthews and Dubois were standing in the entrance- way, cue sticks in hand, having heard Charlie's screech, the silence, the bedlam that followed and then had seen the retreating Wilmot scurrying down the hall to the staircase. McLennon turned and bellowed "Brownie!" towards the staircase.

The Orderly Corporal, oblivious to the medical emergency, scurried from place to place picking up coins and dollar bills beseeching the gathering: "C'mon you guys! Or it's outa my own pocket fer Chrissakes!" Nobody listened, all being more interested in the scene on the floor in front of the bar.

"C'mon! Jesus!" he whined.

A crowd circled Charlie looking down as she held Barber's head in her lap, pressing the towel to the cut.

Someone came through the circle and knelt beside Barber. Gotta be the Medical Assistant. Civvies call them male nurses.

Charlie looked at him and stood quickly and pushed her way through the crowd and headed for the women's can. I watched her and just before she reached the washroom door she put her hands to her face and sobbed. Two or three airwomen came to her side and they went in with her. She probably wouldn't get any more dirty track numbers, I thought. Not for awhile, anyway. Barber, now fully conscious, was in a sitting position.

"The bitch hit me over the head. What did she hit me with?" he asked, peering out from under the towel.

"She didn't touch you, pizza-face," said a woman's voice.

"Matter of fact she tried to stop the bleeding after you hit the floor. I'da left you fer the friggin' crows, if it hadda bin me, jerk." I turned to see who spoke.

Rosie, the redhead stood off the end of the bar, holding a bottle of beer. How long had she been here?

"Up yers, Rosie." said Barber weakly. A loud "Wooooo!" went up at that. They pulled him to his feet, one guy per arm holding him erect, with the Med A pressing what was once a white towel to his forehead.

"Wilmot pegged a crib board atcha, Barber. I guess even nerds don't like to see someone hittin' a girl."

This came from the circle of observers that now widened to allow Barber, his wingmen and the Med A through, on their way to the base hospital for stitchery. "PIG!" an airwoman shouted as Barber passed.

"And don't even think about puttin' anyone on charge, Barber you ignorant dork or you'll get more'n a ding on the gourd. I goddam guarantee it!" said Bobby, still sweeping up glass from behind the bar. "That man should be shot with a ball of his own poop!"

He poured the glass from the dustpan into the garbage can. He looked at me. "Welcome to Mont Apica! God! First time in a long time we had one of those. Want a beer?"

"I'm supposed to get a PAIR of beer!" came a voice from behind me. And there she was. Miss Bobby Pins, now standing beside me, pointing at my nose.

"One at a time eh, Rosie baby. Hey, I guess you told him, huh?" said Bobby tilting his head at the door.

"The lousy jerk! You cannot believe the hard time he gives the airwomen on our crew. Good for Charlie and good for Wilmot, even if he is a nerd. Maybe he's not, afterall, eh? Gimme a Dow, wouldja Bobby baby? And the new guy's payin," she said, smiling and jerking her thumb at me.

Bobby gave me a stupid grin, raised his eyebrows and plunked down a Dow and a refill for me. I reached into a pocket for fifty cents."

"Lucky you eh?" said Bobby.

"I hope yer payin' fer that with yer own money," said the worried Orderly Corporal over my shoulder.

"I didn't touch your money, honest!" I said.

"Give the guy a break, willya Billy? He's been here about twenty minutes, and first there's a damn brawl and now you accusin' him of stealin' yer friggin meal-ticket money. Buzz off fer Chrissakes!" said Rosie, glaring at "Someone scooped three-seventy-five offa me when Barber knocked my cash box on the friggin' floor, that's all I know, eh? I gotta come up with that, eh? Or report it, eh?" he said looking very stressed. "It's bad enough doin' this joe-job without all this shit goin' on, eh?"

"You won't hafta report nothin'," said Bobby who then yelled for the room to be quiet. The Teddies were moaning about "know, know, knowing him," on the Wurlitzer.

"Now listen! Bill here has lost a bunch of money! Whosever got it, give it back, or he'll get in shit and so will we and they'll close this place for another week like they did when Crew Three had the party!"

A cheer arose, obviously from Crew Three members. Must have been a good one. I noticed that it was now dark outside.

"It's summertime summertime sum-sum summertime!" boomed the juke.

Someone yelled at the beleaguered Orderly Corporal and he turned just in time to be hit with a couple of crumpled ones.

Rosie thanked me for the beer and asked me where my French buddy was.

"He's playing pool with Frog and Bruce," I answered, noticing that she was just tall enough to sort of park her shirt pockets on the bar.

"Are you roomin' with Frog and Bruce?" she asked, brightening.

"Yup. Nice guys," said I, starting now to feel the Black Labels. I asked if they ever danced down here; visions of American Bandstand and the HI-Y Club beerily danced in my head. Shake yer leaker at Mont Apeaker! I smiled to myself.

"I should be so lucky," said Rosie. She looked at

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him.

"What are you grinnin' about anyways, airman?" "Nothin'," I said. "Just thought of something, is all. "This helps you to grin, I think." I held up the beer

## bottle.

"You got a nice smile, John," she said and leaned closer. "But if I'm thinkin' what yer thinkin', you should maybe buy some more beer. I'm drinkin' Dow." I actually translated that into thinking she wanted to dance. For one micro-second it struck me that perhaps she had the horizontal bop in mind, but I dismissed that totally and instantly. Barrack-room fantasies can come to life and hit you smack in the face like a warm pie but are not to be believed, or even acknowledged. Women would never engage in five minutes of conversation, drink your beer and then leeringly suggest the hayroll was just around the next curve. Would they?

"Couple more beers Bobby, please," said I, enunciating carefully. I offered her a cigarette. She took it, and I lit it for her, hand trembling just a bit; not much.

"So, you'd like to dance?" I said to Rosie. Suave.

"Did I say that? Sure, if you want to," she said and grabbed my hand and led me over to the clear area in front of the jukebox. I dropped a quarter in, and she pushed the five selections. We waited until the right 45 was scooped and dropped on the turntable. The needle hissed.

"On a day like today..." Pat Boone groaned.

She pushed them up against me and held both there and we struggled around as Pat wrote his sandy letters. The dance was, as they say, a buckle-shiner.

As the song neared its end, I found myself, for the second time that day, in the same company, thinking of sitting on ice, Corporal Hollander, sliding down razor blades and my high school French teacher.

me.

We jived to "Don't Be Cruel" and went back to the

bar.

"Hey you dance pretty good," she said. Then into my ear, "specially the slow ones," and she giggled. Dear God.

I smiled my shitfaced smile, the beer drinking me, now. Mabel wasn't on the table, but I think she's thinkin' about it, I thought.

"Hey you goin' to the Mess Dinner?" asked Rosie. She was starting to look like a redheaded Marilyn Monroe. Her bobbypins glinted when she turned her head to flick her cigarette into the ashtray.

"What Mess Dinner?" I asked, slurping down the bottom of another Black.

"Next month. You get to wear your summer dress uniform with a white shirt and a bowtie. You'd look cute in a bowtie!" she said.

"Some Groupie's coming up from Command to inspect the base and open the new games room here in the club."

I thought about ordering another beer, changed my mind, then ordered another beer. God, this was alright. Really OK.

Bobby brought the Black and said to her, "I heard what you said, Rosie. Actually, if you're not at work, you're at the mess dinner. Simple as that. It's compulsory. But you and everyone else might be at work anyways. Jimmy the steward in the Officers' overheard the C Ops O saying he wouldn't be surprised if Command pulled an alert while the Groupie's here, to see if you poor idiots up the hill can hack it. It kinda makes sense. Why the hell would he wanna come up here just to open a little friggin' games room?"

"You mean the games room where Frog and Dubois and McLennon are shooting pool back there is new?" I

asked, missing the point, almost out of it.

"No its old, you dumb fart. We're just gonna paint it for the Groupie!" laughed Rosie. She lit another Sweet Caporal, and offered me one.

"I didn't see it yet," I offered blearily. "Besides I don' shoopool."

"I don' SHOOPOOL either, Johnny," she said laughing, looking into my face. "I think you're gettin' pissed", she said. Then, in a low voice, "Let's go for a walk, Okay? I'll show you around a bit."

"O.K." I grinned. "Maybe we could go to the snack bar'er sumthin'. I'm fuc...whoops, sorry, REALLY starved."

Bobby winked as we left the bar. "Hey take it easy on the new recruit Rosie!"

"Buzz off and mind yer own friggin' business," said Princess Rosie. "We're goin' for a walk so get yer friggin' minds outa the gutter for once,- eh?"

So there. My moist mind was not in the gutter. But there was a light at the end of the beer tunnel now, no doubt about it.

As we walked past the soon-to-be-toasted new games room, I heard someone say "Come on Dubois! Gimme a chance to win it back. You don't hafta hit the pit now! You can sleep all night fer chrissakes!" Dubois, whose last act at basic training after we were released from jail for drinking underage was to sell a non-existent floor polisher to an entire course of wide-eyed new recruits for sixty bucks, was polishing someone else, it seemed.

We had walked maybe fifty yards; me remarking on the brightness of the stars, her singing a little of the Disney tune, "When you wish upon a star, makes no difference who you are...," when she said she wanted to show me something. She did. She showed me that around

the back of the administration building there was a door to the basement, unlocked. Inside were cartons of files and old filing cabinets and broken office furniture. And an old mattress and a blanket.

I learned a lot of things that night, my first night at R.C.A.F. Station Mont Apica.

I learned again how abusive people can be to one another.

I learned how friendly strangers can be to one another, instantly becoming close friends.

I learned that one was to never, ever touch Rosie's bobbypins.

And I learned that beer is a cleverly disguised kind of human fabric softener.

As we snuck out of the Admin building basement into the crisp northern Quebec air, we could still hear the Airmen's club jukebox, pumpin' out Fats Domino. "I foun' ma threeel, on blueberry heel "

"They probably didn't drink beer up on blueberry hill," I said, making myself blush, and we both laughed.

We walked up to the rec center to grab a hamburger at the snack bar. Rosie showed me around the rec center, the pool, the gym, the base theatre ("Ben Hur" was showing daily at seven and nine, until Sunday) and we walked past a door to the basement marked, "Mont Apica Radio Station - M.A.R.S.- 1250 - ".

Above the door blinked a red light that read "ON AIR". Rosie explained it was just a small station for the base run with a volunteer staff. Everyone had a different show; country and western, hit parade, a cooking show. She said she had a friend who worked there two nights a week. I said I'd like to see it sometime and Rosie said she was in there all the time, watching her friend on the radio, sometimes helping sort records.

We had our burgers, and I, starved, had a huge side

of fries and a chocolate milkshake.

I walked her back, incompliant in my resolve.

It was 1958, I was the naive minister's kid with the complexion problem and she was the rough redhead with her only secret under bobbypins, who helped me grow up just a little. We were the sentinels in a cold war. But only up the hill.

It was the Pinetree Line in the summer of '58. Rock'n'roll was here to stay, Dief the Chief was speakin' weird French, the Yanks were likin' Ike, the Russians Were Cornin'! and we were trying to turn a whitewall haircut into a ducktail, uniforms into poodle skirts and boots into penny loafers.

How's yer bird, don't be square, real gone, let's get drunk and BE SOMEBODY!! A-bop bob alooma balop bam boom! Immortal we were, at eighteen. Magic.

## **The Poplar**

I dream of this so much I sometimes wonder if it ever happened. It did of course, in Albany, New York, the first time. Sometimes in my dream I'm a child again, alone, up there. Sometimes they are with me. Where are they now? Do they dream about their trees?

My Dad had been "called" to Albany in 1949 to preach at West End Presbyterian, and we lived in a house about a block from the church, on North Main Avenue.

I grew up in Hopalong Cassidy outfits, riding "Topper", my Schwinn balloon-tired bike I'd named after Hoppy's horse. I shot bad guys and Indians, living *Saturday afternoons in the Madison theatre, wearing out* elbows and knees and PF Flyers and striped T-shirts and bummin' around with a kid named Kirby.

I remember Kirby's Mom used to blow a whistle when it was time for him to go home. She wasn't crazy about me, because I was a minister's kid, and therefore, somehow tainted. We were supposed to glow in the dark or something, I guess.

Every now and then we would beat the crap out of each other, but usually we were pretty compatible, Kirby and I. But to Kirby's Mom, it was the minister's son's fault if there was trouble. I was no different from any other kid, but I was supposed to be. My dad felt the same way.

Kirby and I were always on the lookout for old pieces of plywood and boards and stuff that we could

hammer together into a clubhouse over in the sandhills, behind the motor vee-hickle, as the Noo Yawkahs called it, where a bunch of state civil servants dispensed drivers licenses and plates. The sandhills were perhaps half a block in size, with a small patch of woods running down one side. That's where the Indians always hid before the attack. Houses framed one end and the motor vee-hickle's L-shape made the square complete. But it was mostly sand; a wonderful desert for Hoppy and Topper.

Sometimes, when we were goofing around in the sandhills, the guy who had a crush on my sister Betty would call me over to his office window in die motor vee-hicle, slip me a note for her (my father did not approve of him), and give me a quarter and a couple of good thick rubber bands and a handful of paper clips for my trouble. Kirby and I would either use the rubber bands to make good bows for the Indian's arsenal or to fire the paper clips at the Graziano kids who lived behind my house and who regularly tore our clubhouses down.

One day I boosted a whole pack of Old Golds from my dad. Kirby and I smoked about nine each, until his Mom blew the get-home whistle and he promptly went home reeking of tobacco smoke. Kirby confessed before she had the first question out of her mouth. He nailed me, of course, and she called the minister about his son again.

I was whacked on the ass and sent to bed, and spent about a week of that summer vacation in the yard, sometimes mowing it.

Kirby was forbidden to have anything to do with me or they threatened to lock up his rusty, balloon-tired Schwinn.

And so I remember going alone to the sandhills one day after I was released from House Arrest. The wind was blowing steadily and strongly, kicking up little swirls here and there and rattling the branches and leaves in the trees and bushes and really bending a stand of poplars that stood between the sandhills and the backyards of some houses on McMann Avenue.

They say, and it's true, that everything looks so much smaller to an adult revisiting the places of his youth. But if I could look up now into the tallest reaches of the poplars I swear they would be as tall as they were in '49. Would they be eighty feet? A hundred, maybe?

There was one that was taller and as they all whipped and bent in the wind, I walked to its base and looked up at it bucking and swaying, felt its knarled trunk-bark and finding hand and footholds to help me reach the lower branches, began to climb. I climbed for no good reason other than that's how small boys are programmed. Do exactly what comes to mind now.

I'd better tell you here that I've never been comfortable with heights. Sitting inside the slender steel tube of an airplane doesn't bother me, but precarious ladders and roof-edges and the like, scare the living bejeezus out of me. I used to have a nightmare that I was spread-eagle face down on a platform that was balanced on a swaying pole that dipped earthward and then came back up to dip the other way and return. I'd holler and sweat and Mom would be there when I awakened. I never yell when I have the tree dream.

So it was a surprise that I found myself actually wanting to climb this huge poplar as it swayed and creaked in the wind, leaves beating a tattoo against each other. It looked safe, the branches big and reassuring, and if I held on tight as I went up I'd be okay.

I reached the first branch and pulled myself up, and throwing a leg over it grabbed another one and stood on the first. I was maybe six feet up and I could feel the wind pushing at my little body as I continued to shinny and put the P.F. Flyers in the grooves and crotches and elbows of that old poplar, moving up, up.

I could, by this time, look behind me straight into a second-floor bedroom window about fifty feet away but that was behind me and I remember knowing enough to let the wind work for me and push me into the tree. I looked down at my bike on the ground, so small.

I climbed. The wind in my face made my eyes teary, and the tears would run back into my ears.

It was one of those windy days that comes complete with the blue sky and clouds that writers say are "mares'-tails scudding across the sky".

My T-shirt caught on the stump of a branch torn off by another long-ago windstorm and I had to let go one hand to get it unhooked, but I was standing on a pretty good perch and that was no sweat.

By now I could see the tarred, flat roof of the four-story Motor Vee-hickle through the flapping leaves, the hole in the top of the chimney on the house behind me and I could feel the sway, maybe three feet to the front and then back as the wind gusted and abated, shoving the more recent, more slender growth at the top easily.

My palms are sweating as I write this, but I can honestly say I felt no fear then.

I thought about my buddy Kirby and how I could prove to him - to anybody - I had actually done this marvelous, courageous, crazy thing. The thought that I might *NOT* do it, instead go crashing down, bouncing through branches to hit the sand and lie dead beside my bike never entered my mind. I was Hoppy. Nothing could touch me.

I came up on a piece of a kite, its paper mostly gone, but the stick frame still held together with dried old twine, and its tail of little frayed bow-ties flying straight out into the wind. It wouldn't have been too hard to get this down, I thought. Maybe it belonged to a little kid afraid to climb trees. Maybe his daddy warned him <u>that</u> would happen if he flew it too close to die poplars. Maybe he took a licking for losing his kite.

I stepped into some pretty good-sized branches spaced not too far apart on die trunk in the middle part and that made it almost like walking up stairs. The leaves ruffled around, shading, then revealing the sun-shafts, like moving your hand between a light and your eyes.

Some old bark gave way under my foot once and I slipped, sticking both sneakers out into space for a couple of seconds but I had been holding the branch above and I swung back, heart quickening. I clung to the trunk and finally exhaled. My palms were sweaty.

I was close to the top now, maybe fifteen or twenty feet to go, and realized that I might not go any higher. I wanted to, badly. There was a decent branch about the size of my bike handlebars just eight inches above my reach. I tried to stand on my toes like that ballet dancer on Ed Sullivan last Sunday, but it hurt and didn't get me that much closer.

The poplar rattled and groaned as a real strong gust shook it and I hung on, my face against the narrow trunk. A branch below me cracked and as I looked down, feeling detached somehow, it peeled away from the trunk where it broke and it fell for about five seconds, landing not far from my bike. My weight must have weakened it, and the wind did the rest.

What I held onto now was a trunk about six inches in diameter, with that last good standin'-up-on-branch just ....up....there. I grabbed the trunk in a full-nelson, like Argen<u>tina</u> Rocca, and hoisted the PF's up off the branch an inch or two.

I shimmied like one of those coconut guys you see in National Geographic, snagged the branch with one hand, got a sneaker hold, threw myself over it and holding on to the slender, swaying trunk, stood at the very top of the poplar.

No leaves around me now. I stood on the topmost branch, hugging the poplar with my left arm. I hooked one of my future brother-in-law's rubber bands over the top.

The memory of this moment has never left me. The wind was at my back as the poplar and I, now one, bent in the breezy gusts pushing at us, flapping my jean legs and filling my Hoppy shirt as it would a sail.

I remember I looked - not at the buildings and houses and tenements and factories on the skyline, but above it; straight out at the sky with its clouds moving like white ships, over me, through me, away from me. I filled with such glorious exhilaration and a wonderful, free energy and power that I cried and yelled forever and hugged the tree while we swayed and leaned with the wind that blew the poplars and the little tree-climber that day in the sandhills.

I wonder if the rubber band is still around the top of my poplar? I sure had a hard time trying to prove to Kirby that I'd really climbed up there. He wouldn't cl....

"Hey, J-J-John it's a nice p-p-poem, but you don't have to go into a t-t-trance, fer Chrissake", said Mathews. "You look like a friggin' z-z-zombie."

I came out of my past with a jolt. I'd been staring at the wall. The radio was on, crackling static.

"What was that called that was on the radio just now?" I asked. "It's Flying High or something, isn't it?"

"'High Flight', dummy," said McLennon. "It's a flyin\* poem. I mean a poem about flyin'. Can ya believe it, eh? At a radar station? Jesus. Hardly fits us ground-pounders. You sure can tell the ol' man flew Spits eh, slippin' them surly bonds of earth and all..." The base radio station had signed off with "God Save The Queen" and the poem "High Flight" and had been crackling with static for a few minutes while I was back in Albany New York, up in the big poplar in the sandhills. Touching His face.

## **Pitches and Catches**

Dubois, Frog, Bruce and I pretty well travelled as a team for the next few weeks at Mont Apica. The crew split in half after the dayshifts up the hill; one half to graveyard, the other to evening shift and we were on the same half, so we became pretty good buddies.

They started me as a plotter on crew and I spent my working hours wearing headphones, talking to a radar op and pushing tin arrows and plaques around the big horizontal plotting board, the huge map of our area. I got so good I could pitch a tin arrow and hit the azimuth and range from a sitting position seven out of 10 times.

Occasionally I would be overlap plotter and get hooked up to some babe down the Pinetree Line at Senneterre or maybe Moisie, up in Sept Isles, and get into some pretty interesting plots, believe me.

Sometimes on evening shift I'd pull tote-board duty and that was a pretty soft touch if there wasn't too much practice intercept action going on, or an air defence exercise. It mainly involved posting the weather and runway status, and the track numbers, speed and altitude and ID on the normal traffic. Most of the heavy work on totes happened on dayshift, and they put the more experienced tote board ops on then. But I was getting pretty good at that too, flingin' the little black hooked letters through the black venetian-blind slats.

I had one shift in radar report. It was a midnight shift and I hung on every sweep of the green trace on the

scope as if that was the one that would paint the blips of the leading Russian bombers in THE ATTACK. I couldn't believe some people had problems staying awake on scope. It scared me.

I passed down everything that moved to my plotter as an initial plot whether it was a piece of electronic poop or not. I calculated speeds to within 10 knots of the actual speed showing in the Trans-Canada Vanguard's cockpit. I bugged the poor guy on height-finder mercilessly for height re-checks until he told me to get lost. He was lying down and said if I got something new that was an actual moving aircraft, he'd be glad to find height on the son of a bitch but until then would I piss off? I thought that was less than total devotion to duty, but I got the point. When I was relieved after an hour on the scope, I was wound up like a top; my eyes burned from staring at the green sweep. It swung around five times per minute, out two hundred miles from where I sat.

The centre of the scope was cluttered with a few miles of constant pale green radar reflections received from the terrain and buildings closest to the antenna. I've always thought they were there to remind us of where we were, in the centre of the energy that flew at the speed of light how far out into the cosmos? These reflected constantly and returned, some strong and distinct, others weak and misty, distorted by time and space. The sharp clear reflected images could be suspected but not forgotten. If something flew or fell to earth inside the clutter it wasn't seen by many eyes, save those in the surrounding green and quiet forests. We called them P.E.'s. Permanent echoes.

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For a while I was a keener in radar report, yes sir. I liked

the work. It was exciting. Sometimes, on days and evening shifts, I'd wander up to the weapons room on my break and watch the Fighter Controllers do practice intercepts with the Rhino and Jumbo Squadrons out of Bagtown. They dealt in M.A.'s (missions accomplished) and M.I.'s (missed intercepts) as a sort of proficiency scoreboard. Once while I watched, the Duty Controller got eleven M.A.'s, and no M.I.'s out of one mission, and when he had returned his fighter to base he whooped it up with his assistant like he'd won the war, shaking hands, backslapping and slam dunking wads of paper in the baskets.

We had a good crew. Most of us got along, we worked pretty well together and we partied exceptionally well as a team. The officers and senior and junior NCO's treated us fairly. Life was a pleasant routine for me. I bumped and thumped in the bus up the hill, worked, ground the gears goin' down the hill, pissed it up in the Airmen's, chowed down in the messhall, did laundry and ironing not often enough, cleaned the room when it was my turn for the weekly inspection by the Old Man and his sidekicks. We drank coffee in the snack bar, went to the show, and thought about home. Finally, it was summer.

There was a base softball league, and crew 3 was the team to beat. At least we thought we were; mainly because we had a guy named Roger Poirier, a short, stocky French guy from someplace near Sherbrooke who could hit a softball halfway to Chicoutimi and catch it before it hit the ground.

I couldn't catch a cold or hit an elephant in the ass with a snow shovel, so Roger would take me out on a few mornings and hit me grounders and then he'd show me how to hit it once in a while.

"You swin' lac de hairwoman, 'unter", he'd say, and lob it at me again. He even drove me home to Sherbrooke once in his '55 Pontiac, right to my front door. All the way home we sang like hell along with the hit parade on the car radio; it was a French radio station with a French disk jockey playing English hits. It was a nice compromise for the times I thought. English stations, on the other hand, didn't play a hell of a lot of Ti-Blanc Richard, as I recall. The jock would holler, "RADIO Say Kay Vay Ell! Ici les freres Everly -Don et Phil! I Can' 'elp It If I'm Still in Love Wit Choo!"

Roger would belt it out in his Frenglish at the passing cows, "Today hi paz me on de street, an my 'eart fell on my foot. Hi can' 'elp hit hif hime still hin love wit choo!" I'd wet myself and Roger would thump me on the arm.

"Don laugh hat me! You sing as worse as me, 'unter!"

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The ball games were really intense situations, and it was fastball, so that mother really came zappin' in there.

Slowpitch hadn't been invented by 1958; at least not for adults. Everyone smelled like a dead rat while we played, even though most of us showered at least occasionally.

In an effort to ward off the B-52-like northern Quebec black flies, we covered ourselves with some concoction the base Search and Rescue team would use when they were pretending to search for and rescue someone. Occasionally they'd be tasked with looking for a lost moose hunter or fisherman. Never anything serious. I always thought if I was lost and these guys showed up smelling like that, I'd ask to find my own way out of the woods. But it did keep the black hordes away, and other people. I was thinking about volunteering for Search and Rescue. It seemed like a jammy touch, getting time off to mess around in the woods once in a while.

One Saturday afternoon in June we were all down at the ballfield to play a game against crew two. This was Rosie and Charlie Graham's crew, complete with Barber, who lounged up against the side of the backstop making wisecracks and living up to his rep. I spotted Charlie and hollered hi to her. She smiled and waved to me as she shagged flyballs in the outfield before the game.

It was the same day as the scheduled Airmen's mess dinner, so it didn't look like there would be a hell of a lot of postgame beers going down later. Everyone would be getting ready for the cocktail hour, the dinner, and the official opening of the games room by Group Captain Whatisface from Command.

The baseball field was in a low-lying area on the other side of the highway, off-base. Sometimes, for days after a rain, the ground depressions around the bases and home plate looked like small ponds. It was fun to watch games on those days, with people slippin' and slidin' around, looking like they'd been in a mudder-type football game. It was fun to watch.

We played with the bases submerged once and had to be hosed down before we were allowed to go into the barracks to change. But it was pretty good on this day. Somebody had even been out with a lime bag and had drawn baselines that were darn near straight.

As I said, we had a pretty good team. Frog and McLennon were okay players and I could hit it occasionally (thanks to Roger's coaching), but catching was a big problem so they stuck me in left field, where supposedly, not many are hit. We were up first, but just before the game Roger and I went out in the field and he threw me some high ones, most of which I misjudged or mishandled, catching them on the glove's heel or watching them bounce off the webbing and go behind me. Roger hollered, " Catch wit boat 'and !" and I'd get the other hand up there.

Dubois was our pitcher, and not a bad one at that, with a windmill style that struck out a few. He told Frog and McLennon and me that he once played on a provincial championship team from Windsor. We said, "Sure, and I want you to meet Yogi and that's Mickey and I'm Roy Campanella." He asked us if we'd care to bet on that, cause he would prove it. Frog showed him the finger and squawked in his Satchmo voice to, "P-P-Prove this, Dubois!" Frog told him he owed so many people on base he didn't have a pot to pee in anyways. Dubois said "O.K. den Froggy, I bet you the twenny hi owe you, double or nuttin."

"G-G-Git st-stuffed," said Frog.

We also had an Airwomen named Goldie, a tough farm lady from somewhere out on the Prairies, who could hit it through the grill of a Chevy Biscayne if she wanted to.

"Chatter in the infield! Let's hear some chatter! Hun Gerry! Hun Dubois! Show him the dark one! Hun Gerry!"

We'd all join in the weird chants of ballplayers as Dubois hurled it.

It was pretty close for the first few innings. Their pitcher was no Dubois, but all we could do was ground out to first, it seemed. When we batted, a mickey of rye floated down the bench once or twice that we took shots from, keeping an eye on the ump and holding it inside a glove as we drank.

They got a couple of runs; one on a pop-up to left by Charlie Graham that I promptly dropped, and then, after I finally located it between my feet, threw to first as she ran to second. I didn't know at this stage if it was the rye or lack of talent, but I felt my face redden under its coating of the repulsive bug goo.

Dubois glared at me from the mound and for every new batter thereafter he'd shout at me to come in three steps or move to the left or right until I didn't know my ass from a hole in the ground which was pretty close to the truth anyway. Between innings, Roger, our centre fielder, told Dubois to get off my back and that he would place the outfield. I overheard Dubois tell him, in a stage whisper, to cover me on everything hit my way. My confidence soared.

In the bottom of the sixth we came back with three runs; two of them on a homer by Goldie who hit one over the right field fence and bounced it off the side of Frog's old Dodge that he had to park off base because he didn't have any insurance. A puff of dust rose from beside Frog's car as a chunk of rust hit the ground.

Frog croaked at Goldie as she huffed and puffed on the bench that he had mixed emotions about her hit.

"It's 1-1-like seein' the S-S-Station Warrant Of-Officer go over a cliff in yer n-n-new f-friggin' Cadillac!"

With two down I got on base on a dinky grounder to the shortstop that she threw wide. It was Rosie, and Barber yelled something at her from out in the field and was in turn yelled at by three women on our team and two on theirs. Four of the five who were yelling used the word "asshole".

Barber walked away toward the fence and turned around with that smirk still there. I glanced at Wilmot in the stands who had a grin on his face. His nerd image had vanished weeks ago, after his David vs. Goliath act with the crib board. He now commanded a kind of hesitant respect from the airmen, but the airwomen clearly admired him for his chivalrous act and he was often the centre of their attention.

On the next pitch I was called out for leading off before the ball had left the pitcher's hand. I felt like a jerk, but I didn't know that rule and said so. Every game of ball I'd ever seen on TV it sure looked like the runner was leading off before the pitcher had even reared back to throw.

As I ran to the bench to fetch my glove it was explained to me in language that Mel Allan never used, that what I'd been watching on TV and what I was now experiencing, were different exercises.

So, I trotted out for our last turn in the field, not exactly bursting with belief in myself. My every stance was adjusted by Dubois and then corrected by Roger. I envisioned myself horribly misjudging the ball, seeing it sail over my head as I raced under it, my glove upraised like some mad butterfly collector. Or it would bounce in front of me, go between my legs as the winning runner scampered home.

In either case we'd lose and it would be my fault. I would be the subject of scorn and abuse for days to come; perhaps months. It would follow me throughout my career, perhaps influencing my chances for promotion. Sweat popped out of palms and forehead, diluting the bug goo. A swarm of black flies buzzed around my face, and occasionally one would score a direct M.A. and take a chunk of me home.

Dubois whiffed one and got an airwoman to ground out. Two down.

"Hows-yer-bird" Rosie came to bat and hit a change-up into right field for a double. She was moved to third by someone who hit a shot down the first base line that the first baseman fielded and threw to first for Dubois. Dubois had not moved off the pitcher's mound and the ball skittered into short right field. Dubois looked darkly at McLennon on second.

"You suppose to cover firs' base!"

"Negative!" shouted McLennon. " But, if you pay me back the ten bucks you owe ME, I'll think about it!" It's never wise to criticize roommates. Especially if you owe them money.

Runners at first and third, three to two for us, bottom of the game. I could feel nervous sweat trickle down my back, into the cleavage..

A truck with R.C.A.F. Police written on its door came down the road and stopped behind the backstop. One of the meatheads, as we respectfully called our military police, stepped out of the truck.

"They finally caught up with you Rosie, baby!" hollered McLennon. "Too hot ta handle!"

That drew a few hoots of laughter. Rosie laughed and stuck her tongue out at Bruce.

The next guy up was Barber who promptly got behind three and two. I stood in left field swatting at a veil of blackfies. I was praying for the end, waiting to lose the game for everybody.

"Give 'im the high and fast one, Gerry baby!" I shouted, hoping he'd swing and miss, hit a grounder, do anything but hit it out here.

Dubois' stared in at the batter, then wound up. Midwindmill the homeplate ump yelled, "Time!"

Dubois' pitch skittered into the dirt. He kicked the ground in disgust, and loudly swore at the ump in French. Roger yelped in the outfield, then realized the ump couldn't understand Dubois and started to laugh.

The Flight-Sergeant in charge of the air force police was talking to the ump through the screen.

Dubois shouted, "Come on for Chrissaake, le's go, Tabernac!"

We all started to holler. We were maybe one pitch

away from victory. I was one pitch away from deliverance, one way or the other. Roger told me Dubois called the ump a horse's ass in French. We gazed in at the ump and the M.P..

"What the hell is going on? Not an alert?" I asked, almost hoping.

"Naaa," said Roger, "Dey would 'ave blow the sireen, Tabernac!"

I agreed with him. "They wouldn't have an alert on the day of the Airmen's Mess Dinner. Not with the Division Commander-in-Chief coming."

I remembered that Bobby the bartender had said something, but that had to be just duff gen, a bad rumour.

"No way dey 'ave a hexercise like dat," he said. 'Ever' one would be drunk up de hill. Not on my life."

They still stood around, talking through the fence. What lousy timing for a conference! What the hell do the meatheads want, anyway?

"Play ball, fer God's sake!" hollered McLennon. The ump shrugged and slowly walked over to crew two's bench and sat on it. The Meathead Flight-Sergeant went back to his truck and said something in the window and a Corporal got out.

They both walked around the backstop, up the line towards first base, hung a left about halfway there, and walked out to the mound. There wasn't a sound, just the blackflies and their footsteps on the gravelly infield. The Flight-Sergeant asked Dubois something. Dubois nodded yes and hung his head.

He dropped his glove and the ball. They took off his hat and dropped it. They snapped handcuffs on him.

The rest of us stood dumbfounded as our pitcher was led away.

"What the hell is goin' on?" yelled McLennon. "He's on ch-ch-charge!" yelled Frog. "Ho-ho holy Christ!" Dubois gave a small wave to us, a sickly expression on his face as they put him in the in the back of the truck, and drove off.

We stood transfixed, not moving from our positions, each mouth agape and surrounded by flies, staring at the departing meathead truck as it went up the gravel road to the guardhouse kicking up dust.

"Wha de 'ell his goin' hon?" parroted Roger as he ran in to the ump. We all ran in to listen, and the other crew's team completed the mob scene around home plate.

The ump, a recreation-specialist named Boots should "Shaddup!" at the top of his lungs and almost blew off three hats.

"The Flight says Dubois' been charged with theft. Something about screwin' some trainees in St. Johns out of a floor polisher or somethin'. That's all I friggin' know. If youse crew three wanna finish the game, get another friggin' pitcher toot sweet, 'er she's forfeited eh? I ain't got time fer this shit. I'm workin' the bar at the friggin' mess dinner in two friggin' hours eh!" said Boots, clearly troubled and not able to mix sports and embezzlement.

We got one of the people on crew who was just watching the game to play in the field and Roger went in to throw what we hoped would be the last pitch. Roger could hit and field, but he wasn't a pitcher. Clearly, team morale had taken a sudden dive as we despondently returned, Peanuts-like, to our positions.

Roger asked Boots the ump for some practice throws.

"All right, but hurry up fer Chrissakes willya. This ain't the friggin' world series, eh?"

His first practice pitch sailed up over the backstop.

When they finally retrieved the ball he tried again and hit the ump, Boots, who was standing thirty feet from

homeplate talking to someone in the stands, in the ass.

His third through eighth attempts were equally dismal. He threw it fast, but everywhere except over home plate.

The other team hooted at him. Frog came in and said something to him. Boots, rubbing his butt, glared at Roger and shouted "BATTER UP! NOW!"

Barber stepped up to the plate, with that stupid grin on his face, waving the bat at Roger.

We started the chant, "C'mon Rog. C'mon Rog put it by him Rog. Put it by "

We stopped the crooning to watch the pitch. We needn't have. We had time for three or four more "Put it by hims" and at least two more "c'mon Roges."

For Roger had decided not to risk his loose cannon fastball and had instead lobbed a balloon into Barber that had the speed a baby could put on a beach ball. After watching Dubois' rocket zing in there and bring tears to our catcher's eyes, this was slo-mo.

It seemed to take forever to get there, as it floated toward home plate. Barber started to swing about four times. But he did come around on it when it finally arrived and stroked it high into the air between second and third. It was destined to be hit to me, and it was. I stood transfixed, rooted to the spot. It sailed up, up up; a tiny white pill against the blue sky and the haze of flies around me. It reached its pinnacle and began its descent as I ran forward and back, taking occasional side-steps like a deranged rumba student at Arthur Murray's, trying to position myself. I knew what Chicken Little must have felt like.

"I got it!" I yelled, praying I wasn't lying. Always call for it, Roger had told me. I could see him out of the corner of my eye charging towards me from the pitcher's mound. Someone was running towards me from my left, too.

I was dimly aware of shouts of both support and derision. The softball filled my vision. If lightening had struck the ground ten feet from where I stood, I would not have noticed. It was horsehide hypnosis. I moved up to where I was sure it would fall.

Barber must have hit the son of a bitch ten thousand feet up. I moved BACK to where I was sure it would fall.

It came. I held my glove open at it, peeking over the top.

"TWO 'AND!" I heard Roger yell as he galloped toward me, ready to recover the ball that I was about to drop and rifle it to home plate. I put my right hand out beside the glove.

It fell. I saw the seams and closed my eyes. It found me and grazing the meaty part of my ungloved right hand under the thumb, banked to the left and thwacked into my glove. The searing pain in my hand didn't matter, as Roger and the centrefielder collided rather spectacularly in front of me and fell in a heap on the ground. They looked up at me as I stared amazed into my glove and we all slapped backs and laughed.

Some of us had won - so far that day - and to be sure, the day wasn't over yet. I caught a ball and the meatheads caught our pitcher stealing.

## **Drinks and Dinner**

For formal occasions like a Mess Dinner, officers had a special Mess Kit. I always thought that sounded like those aluminum eating utensils you had when you were a boy scout, the plate, cup, bowl and pot with top and lid, which all fitted inside each other and then in a canvas sack.

The Officer's Mess Kit was a snappy formal wear outfit that made them all look a bit like the Student Prince. The Other Ranks made do with the regular dress uniform worn with a white shirt and a black bowtie.

I had a white shirt, but I had to scrounge a black bowtie from somebody working evenings the night of the Mess Dinner. It was a clip-on that wouldn't clip on each side of the collar equally for some strange reason, so I looked slightly askew; sort of listing to starboard. Three or four airwomen came up to me at the cocktail party and tried to straighten it, but it returned to its cock-eyed position.

There was cheese and crackers and bowls of sickeninglysweet punch. We all stood around and giggled self-consciously, uncomfortably trying to assume an air of formality in the same room where every other night of the week we drank and swore and farted and laughed and flirted and argued.

Frog and McLennon and I talked about the demise of Dubois. Rumour had it he was going up on charge Monday. He was in the digger. I figured the meatheads would be around Monday afternoon to get his stuff. He was in a world of trouble.

The airwomen wore white shirts and regular ties and white gloves. They also postured, sticking out pinkies while sipping punch and snickering.

Pritchard, the President of the Airmen's Mess Committee, an elected group overseeing the day-to-day operations of the club, had volunteered to help Bobby and Boots make the bowls of punch after the ball game. He now stood in a corner noticeably gassed, laughing too loud and pulling everyone's bowtie as they passed and saying rude things to the women. Boots and Bobbie had returned to barracks, their bartending duties not starting until the dinner was completed, the speeches were made and the ceremonial opening of the new gamesroom by the Group Captain and the Commanding Officer was done. They too, like Pritchard, had done their fair share of punch tasting while preparing the noxious brew, but of course they could hit the pit for a while and recover.

Pritchard, desperately needing the healing powers of sleep, had to struggle into his bowtie and go back to the mess.

Or, more accurately, start one.

He looked a bit like Howdy Doody, Pritchard, especially when drunk, and now he *WAS* Howdy Doody, freckle-faced with a cowlick and a goofy grin. He moved in herky-jerky motions as the punch pulled his strings. Rosie whispered something to him and he laughed like a hyena, whooping and snorting and ending the crocked crescendo with, "NO KIDDIN! AHA!"

At precisely that moment the Group Captain and the Commanding Officer stepped into the room, somewhat hesitantly, followed by the Padre Flight Lieutenant Flith and the Honourary President of the Mess Committee, Flying Officer Stewart.

Pritch hooted and pointed at Rosie and said

"MOIST! HA!" Someone close to the door yelled the command that instantly conveys the message that a high-ranking officer has come in to your presence, and you'd better stand at attention.

"ROOM!"

Pritchard yelled, "BOOM!" and we all came to attention embarrassed and snorting with laughter. God. Let's show them that we have at least a smidgeon of couth, I thought.

The C.O.'s face reddened as he glanced in Pritchard's direction and said, "As you were, ladies and gentlemen. May I introduce to you the Commander of 21st NORAD Division, Group Captain Bell."

We all mumbled something, the Groupie, a smallish man with a grey mustache smiled and nodded and said, "Please carry on," and sidled up to two frightened airmen who visibly stiffened, wishing they'd stood anywhere else but beside the door. The Flying Officer and Padre Flith headed for the punch.

Pritch should have been at the door, of course, being the President of the Mess Committee, to greet the guests and act as host. This was finally suggested to him, and he lurched toward the Groupie and the C.O., slopping punch from his glass as he did so, bumping into people with his Howdy grin in full stretch.

There were some low mumblings of conversation, but most of us were intimidated enough by the presence of a Wing Commander and a Group Captain in the same room, that we were rendered mute. We watched Pritchard as he stood, weaving slightly, waiting for the brass to end the one-sided conversation with the two paralyzed airmen.

Apparently it did, and Pritch shook hands with both Officers and offered them some punch. The C.O. had been appraising Pritch with a sort of careful, curious look, scanning him up and down once or twice. He then said something to him quietly. Pritch emitted a "HA! OH! JESUS! OK!", scurried over to the punch table, placed his empty glass carefully on its side, and with his back to us, zipped up his fly.

A groan came forth. Pritchard now shakily dipped the ladle in the punchbowl and overfilled two glasses, slopped some on his shoes as he swung about focused on the brass and crookedly quick-stepped to fulfill part two of the C.O.'s directive. The officers accepted the drinks and swung away from Pritch rather quickly to engage more "other ranks" in tense conversation.

Pritch stood for a moment staring at their backs and then stuck his fingers in his ears and made a face. The crowd gasped but the brass didn't notice and a couple of guys went to Pritch's side and led him out, towards the can.

As President of the Mess Committee, he had some ceremonies to perform at dinner, and he was supposed to help officiate at the games room ribbon-cutting.

The uncomfortable cocktail party was, for most of us, now taking on a rosy glow as the orange-juice rum and whateverpunch that Boots, Bobby and Pritch had concocted, worked its wackiness into us.

The noise level gradually rose over the next half hour, and people were observed actually having animated chats with the wheels, who now had kind of fixed grins themselves. Small hors d'oeuvres were passed; little sausages on toothpicks and some rubbery shrimp.

Pritchard was back of course, having put cold water on his face or some other equally useless excercise for attaining sobriety. The word came down from the dining room at last.

Pritch, with an entire shrimp trailing red sauce slowly down his tunic front, stood on a chair and hollered, "DINNER IS SERVED!" three times at equal volume, the last announcement to a totally quiet room.

We all filed out through the door of the mess, passing the be-ribboned games room door, with its nearly new dart boards and the pool table covered with a rubber sheet. The cue sticks were all lined up neatly in the rack; the shuffleboard gleamed. The dining room was positively unrecognizable. The tables were arranged down each side of the room, with the head table across the end of the room. Vases of flowers sat on crisp white tablecloths, with beautiful place settings and opened bottles of red wine; one for each foursome.

Frog and McLennon and I sat together. Rosie sat across from me.

We made silly jokes about the number of knives, forks and spoons officers need. We Other Ranks were not burdened by these. Someone, fearing that Emily Post's Book of Etiquette was not a best seller among this crowd, announced that for the cutlery, we should start from the outside and work in.

"Sounds like my girlfriend!" bellowed someone and a great hoot erupted. We were all approaching, with still along way to go, Pritchard's blissful state. But we were accelerating.

We arranged ourselves at the tables. An olive bounced off my ear. I looked up, and Rosie gave me a grin under all those bobby-pins.

Pritchard stood, unsteadily. He shouted, "QUIET PLEASE! QUIET PLEASE! Then again: QUIET PULEEEEESE!"

Once again it had only taken two ear-splitting bellows to silence the crowd. The third rattled the flower arrangements and silenced the busy cooks and waitresses in the kitchen.

The officers stood at their places and gazed apprehensively at Pritch. Padre Flith fumbled in his jacket pocket for something.

Pritchard's countenance now took on the appearance of Howdy's evil twin as he stood unsteadily and cast his heavylidded, reddened eyes over the room and carefully, slowly, earnestly and with great volume announced, "PADRE FLISS WILL NOW SAY GRAYTH."

A roomful of titters broke forth as Pritch fumbled to correct his faux pas. "PADRE PISS WILL SAY GRAYTH NOW?" said Pritchard,, hopefully.

Some of us could only stare down at our lovely place settings, horrified as we listened to a few self-conscious coughs mixed with snorts and snickers.

Padre Flith merely smiled at Pritchard, patted his arm and mumbled, "That's fine, son."

He placed his hand on Pritch's shoulder. Pritch's gaze swung around to look at the Padre. The Padre asked us to bow our heads. Pritch's head fell like a stone, his chin bouncing off his chest. The padre read a prayer asking God to bless and keep safe the assembled airmen and airwomen in our jobs as sentinels, thanked Him for the facilities we enjoyed in our few leisure moments, thanked Him for what we were about to receive, and hoped He would make us truly grateful.

Pritchard's head finally snapped up as he was awakened by the scraping of chairs: "Hey! Please remain standli...standin'... for the toas' to th' queen!" He fumbled with his water glass, raised it straight up Statue of Liberty-style and bellowed:

"LADIES AN' GENNEMEN...THE QUEEN!" I'm sure people in Chicoutimi rose and toasted. On the other hand, maybe not.

We all said, "The Queen" and clinked glasses and chugged the wine.

Tiny salads were served, and Frog made a point of eating his with his larger fork, infuriating Rosie who

upbraided him for his refusal to even pretend he had some etiquette.

Frog then flung an over-ripe cherry tomato her way. It missed and hit the back of some huge motor equipment driver behind her, leaving a circle of red tomato-goo oozing seeds down the back of his tunic.

He didn't notice. The noise level was at the state now where you leaned forward to hear what the person across from you was saying. I glanced at the head table, and the Groupie had just finished saying something that had the Old Man convulsed with laughter.

I glanced at Pritch. His head was down as he ate his salad slowly.

Padre Flith and the Flying officer made small talk; Flith occasionally grinning beatifically and nodding at someone in the crowd.

More wine came and the main course was served. It was steak and lobster, with little tiny carrots, mashed potatoes and peas.

A tiny splash burst forth from my wine glass as somebody two tables away sunk a twenty-footer with a pea. Big cheer. Great crunching sounds now joined the general cacophony as people tore into the lobster, squirting neighbours with lemon juice. The Maritimers at each table gave advice on how a lobster is best cracked.

A great chunk of that inedible green lobster mung hit the center of our table, lodging in the cut flowers. Butter ran onto white shirts off of grinning chins. The wine was poured.

Two Newfie radar techs and an airwoman on crew 2 started up with Ts Da B'y" and we all joined in. The C.O. grinned at this apparent show of the high morale among the troops and smiled and nodded at the Group Captain.

A direct hit with a crusty bun on a wine bottle was

scored and six people rose quickly as the spreading crimson pool on the table came over the sides. A groan went up.

I looked at Pritch and poked McLennon in the ribs.

"Check out Pritchard, for Chrissakes," I cried over the din.

Pritch's head was bobbing up and down, his eyes drooping and closing and reopening as he held his fork up, waving a chunk of steak at his face.

Neither the Padre sitting next to him, or the Flying Officer next in line were paying him any attention.

McLennon nudged Frog who nudged his neighbour and soon almost our whole table watched the bobbing head at the head table as it sank to within two inches of the plate and its contents and then jerked up, only to sink again, deeper. Howdy Doody was sinking fast.

Pritchard finally made it into his meal. Not nose down like in the movies, but comfortably resting on one side, snuggling into the mashed potatoes and peas; the baby carrots near his chin. Not many people had noticed him yet.

The wheels at the head table chatted away, unaware of the comatose Pritchard. The dining room was ringing with laughter and shouts across tables as three hundred fairly-crocked airwomen and airmen held forth.

Someone lobbed a radish at Pritch from the other side of the room. It bounced off the upturned side of his head and caromed to the back of the room. He didn't move.

"I-I-Fm gonna g-g-get 'im ou-outa here," said Frog. Before I could ask how he got up and left the room.

No less than thirty seconds later Frog's face appeared in the porthole in the swinging kitchen door, directly behind the flaked-out Pritch. He had done world-record time to run downstairs, through the bar area and the snakepit to get up to the kitchen by the back stairs and through the crowd of cooks and waitresses to the door.

The room was still alive with noise. The C.O. and the Groupie were having an animated conversation at their end of the table.

As the rest of the room partied on, our table of observers watched as Pritch raised his head up from the plate and, pausing for a two-count as carrots mixed with peas and gravy dripped from the right side of his face, plunged back down on the left side. A piece of cutlery hit the floor under Pritch.

The Padre, Pritch's lucky dinner companion, was talking with his other neighbour between bites and did not want to notice.

The kitchen door swung open. Frog came through walking briskly toward Pritch's back. There had been so much traffic through these doors by the waitresses that no one except our group seemed to notice Frog's entrance.

A few more had noticed the sleeping Pritch by this time and were nudging each other and pointing. One guy even hollered, "Pritch! Pritchard!", a couple of times, thinking that would raise him. No joy.

The C.O. had his back towards the Pritch end of the table and effectively blocked the Groupie's sightline too. Frog quickly raised Pritch's face out of his dinner by the hair with one hand, and tilting his chair back, dragged him and the chair back through the kitchen door.

"Nice goin' Froggie," said McLennon to the table. "Now get him back to barracks and lock him in his friggin' room."

Padre Flith had glanced quickly once at this operation and turned his body to screen the rescue even more from the three and four stripers, smiling and nodding all the while. A small cheer went up from those of us who'd witnessed this near miss with propriety. Involving, of course not only one of our own, but the President of the Mess Committee, who if caught, could be replaced by some jerk who would never exercise his authority and extend the closing time at the bar once in a while. That was something Pritch did often, and for the weakest excuses.

All that remained of Pritchard was his plate with his facial mask done in potatoes and peas.

The raucous dinner party carried on. The "North Atlantic Squandron" flew briefly until the "cabin boy" verse and it was shushed into silence. Nervous glances toward the head table saw the two senior officers regaling each other with stories. They thumped the table and slapped backs, oblivious to almost everything around them, except for perhaps the wine bottle.

Someone, probably a Maritimer, went to the head table, whispered something in the Padre's ear and wrapped Pritch's untouched lobster in a napkin and returned to his seat.

Dessert and coffee were served and small snifters of brandy were brought out and distributed. This was my first mess dinner, but the vets in the crowd were astonished at this Officers'mess-like touch with the brandy. Probably to impress the Groupie, we surmised, and settled back like old boys over smokes and brandy. All of us were now there and wanting more. You might say Pritch's punch had primed the pumps but we certainly could not. Not twice in a row, anyway. Somebody said Pritch had told him earlier they had used ten bottles of gin to make the jet fuel.

The C.O. hammered on his wineglass with a spoon to request silence.

The room quietened slowly and he launched into an

all-out rah-rah talk, praising our devotion to the team concept and saluting us as a "group that worked hard and played jolly hard too, as I've observed! Ha ha!"

He then introduced the Group Captain who rambled on about the importance of NORAD in these times of uncertainty with the U.S.S.R. and how, at one of these far north Pinetree units the vital warning of the attack is coupled with the fearsome arsenal that we control out of Bagotville, the All-Weather CF-100 Squadrons, (who were grounded not two days ago by fog).

Rosie's shoeless foot slowly felt its way up into my pantleg. She grinned a dirty grin at me, and licked her lips. I was glad we didn't have to stand up for a toast.

The Groupie mentioned too, how deserving we were of the finest in facilities and the pride he took in being here to open the latest addition to the Airmen's mess. McLennon casually dipped a knife into his butter and slowly spread it on Frog's hand. Frog moved very slowly, so as not to attract attention, and gently slapped the back of his hand on the front of McLennons tunic.

The Group Captain blathered on and on and more than a few heads began to droop, but finally, to everyone's relief, he finished with a toast to us all, which most of us drank in water, having run out of wine and brandy before he stood to speak.

We all stood shakily and toasted, clinking glasses too much,, and giggled. Someone's glass broke to cheers on the other side of the room.

The C.O. then spoke again. "Thank you for your kind hospitality, ladies and gentlemen." He glanced questioningly at Pritchard's empty chair and continued, "If you could pause at the new games room on your way down to the bar, the good Group Captain could officially declare it open. Thank you."

There was a stampede for the cans. We re-formed

a few minutes later, relieved, in the hallway and on the staircase close to the games room door.

The Commanding Officer and the Group Captain stood in front of the doorway of the darkened games room. A big blue ribbon was taped waist-high across the entrance. Frog and McLennon and I had a pretty good view, having been fairly fast to get to the can and void what seemed like gallons of punch, wine and brandy. After a few minutes, the Honorary President of the Mess Committee, Flying Officer Stewart, who was filling in for the missing Pritchard, yelled for quiet.

The Group Captain stepped forward into the darkened games room doorway brandishing a pair of scissors. He said something about how much effort had gone into making this games room a possibility and then he snipped the ribbon.

Flying Officer Stewart, a prideful look on his face, threw the first of three light switches.

The spotlights on the dartboards blazed to life, illuminating the two targets with their darts in holders above the new automatic dial-type scoreboards. The C.O. smiled into the Group Captain's beaming face.

"Well!" was all he could say, smiling and nodding. The great disguise for feeling total indifference has always been smiling and nodding. The neon lights above the glistening shuffleboard now blinked to life; the blue and red rocks lined up neatly at either end.

"Isn't that the latest rage!" said the Groupie, waving a finger in the C.O.'s face. "Paul, I'll have to issue you a challenge right now!"

"HAHAHA!" we all laughed, insincerely.

"That would be great fun, sir!" responded the C.O., grinning and flushed with pride and booze. "Great fun. Yes."

The reading lamps beside the grouping of leather

chairs and couches also blinked on, the leather glowing in the subdued light. Ashtrays sat on the coffee tables, gleaming. Stacks of the R.C.A.F. magazine, "The Roundel" graced the tables. "A nice quiet place for a cigar and a good book!" said the Groupie.

Oh! Yes sir, that sounds like us, I thought.

Flying Officer Stewart waited a second or two, adding more drama to this truly theatrical opening.

The last light switch was thrown. The three hanging lamps over the pool table illuminated, casting circular pools of bright light over the surface.

"Ho..LEE SHIT!" we said, as one.

Hands flew to cover mouths and eyes widened. A complete line of horrified expressions was brought out at this point, some of the most novel belonging to the Higher Ranks.

In the lamplight lay Pritchard, on his back, the rubber pool table cover pulled up to his chin. Folded neatly at the end of the green felt over a corner pocket were his pants and tunic. He had managed to remove one shoe and one sock and had neatly tucked them into a side pocket. He wore his white shirt still tidily done up at the collar with the bowtie perfectly straight. His Howdy Doody mouth hung open as he breathed deeply. Mashed potatoes and peas were imbedded in his left ear, his nostrils and his hair. His right hand languished in a corner pocket and his left foot sat atop the racked balls.

I swear I saw a grin flicker across the Groupie's face, just for a second after the lights went on over the pool table.

"Good Christ Almighty!" bellowed our Wing Commander, an astonished Commanding Officer.

"That's a bloody poor place for that!" said the Group Captain with the understatement of the evening.

Laughter got a withering look from the Old Man.

He didn't, or couldn't, see the humour. He and the Groupie left quickly after hissing something at poor Flying Officer Stewart. Stewart told a group of us to get Pritch dressed and wait with him in the can for the meatheads. Company for Dubois, I thought.

Another scratch in the snooker game of life for ol' Pritchard. Too bad he was going to miss the party. It had just begun.

## A Staggering Response

I managed to stuff Pritch into his pants and simply gave the socks, shoes and tunic to the meatheads when they came for him. The charge was to be "Conduct Unbecoming An Airman", and the meathead I talked to said they'd keep him overnight and he would probably go in front of the Old Man Monday or Tuesday.

He'd be doing time for this, no doubt.

I joined the party, now at full tilt in the bar.

The jukebox was boppin' out Buddy Knox and Little Richard, folks were jivin' and jitterbuggin' or in tight little laughing, shouting knots all over the room; sitting or standing, tunics off, bowties hanging by one clip and ties loosened, beers and cigarettes waving in the air. It was just a huge thrash.

There was no sign of the C.O., the Groupie, or F/O Stewart, the humiliated Honourary PMC, but the Padre was hangin' in there, nonchalantly chatting with some admin type who clung to the bar like it was a life raft.

The place was jammed. Except for a skeleton crew up the hill, some on-duty meatheads and a communications and radar tech or two, every operational and non-op "other rank" type was in the club.

Rosie spotted me at the bar and took the beer out of my hand, set it down and led me out to dance a slow one. It was Tommy Edwards and "Morning Side of the Mountain", a real buckle-shiner and a song that held a meaning for me that I'd shared with no one. At an all-ranks dance in the Rec Centre a couple of weeks earlier, I had worked up the guts to ask a Flying Officer nursing sister I'd seen around the snack bar a few times, for a dance. We managed to stretch it to about eight dances by the time the thing ended, struggling around in a darkened corner by the Recreation Specialists' office. She was a Brit, from London, she told me. We ended up in Frog's old Dodge, mostly talking, until the first patches of daylight peeked up behind the tower, and she explained she'd prefer to walk home alone. She said the Old Man frowned on fraternization between the ranks, and perhaps we could secretly meet some other time. Goodbye luv; cheerio!

I had a horrible crush on her for days, even inventing some reason to go the hospital for something or other to see if I could spot her. One day in the rec centre I was shooting some baskets with McLennon and she was playing badminton at the other end against some Fighter Controller from crew one. He'd been called to the phone and I got up the nerve to run down and ask her how she was; I had been thinking a lot about her, she sure looked great, and could I see her sometime? "No, I don't think that's possible," she said, shrugging and looking away. I stood there blinking, trying to think of a response. She finally looked at me again and said, softly whispering, "I'm sorry, John." Then louder:

"I think your friend with the basketball is waiting for you."

It was a kick in the kid's heart, but eighteen years means a lot of elasticity. We had been seen, I surmised, and she's been warned. Hands off the "other ranks" or you're out. So it's true, I thought, fraternization DOES breed contempt.

I'm sure she felt contempt for those who controlled people's lives like that. I know I did.

"..and you were on the morning side of the mountain, and I was on the twilight side of the hill". Tommy got it right.

Rosie and I danced around, buckle-shining.

Then, a fast one; Elvis and "All Shook Up," came on and we jived and then "The Stroll" by The Diamonds and half the club dutifully lined up. We strolled, swigging beers and singing at die top of our lungs, up and down as couples took their turns shuckin' and jivin' down the gonzo gauntlet.

Occasionally, female exuberance fueled by punch (and wine with brandy and beer chasers) caused strolling blue skirts to be plucked up, revealing glimpses of garter belt and thigh. Once, as a matter of fact, from the lovely Charlie Graham, and I found myself staring at her.

I made a fuzzy mental note to ask her to dance, later.

By this time, I was feeling fairly exuberant myself, and the beer went down like there was only three swallows per bottle. There probably was. As I stood at the bar, a growing crowd of empties gathered in front of me. My face was numb.

I picked a quarter out of the ashes and beer and Bobby slid me another Black Label. Frog at one point hollered "WH-WH-WHATTA FUCKIN' P-P-PAAAARTY"!

Everyone cheered, even the airwomen, but they immediately covered their mouths with their hands to indicate they were still shocked at the dreaded F-word, in case anyone should get the wrong impression. Rosie did not cover her mouth, but raised her beer glass and silently toasted Frog's declaration.

But Frog's outburst pretty well summed it up. It was an allout thrash, no doubt about it. Some airman, flamed-out and facedown on his table in a puddle of beer, knocked a glass on the floor, and probably still doesn't know he got cussed out by more than a few airwomen who were dancing in their stocking feet. Boots the bartender came out from behind the bar and waded into the drunken, swirling, yelling maelstrom and swept. Six or seven airwomen descended on him for this act of gallantry and danced at him and with him and left him lipstickcovered and grinning as he headed back behind the bar.

"Love is straaaaange ... " crooned Mickey and Sylvia.

Over in a corner, some guy was taking bets he could stand on his head and chug a beer. No big deal, except he would eat the glass afterward. The bets came and he did, sucking the beer up and crunching down all of the beer glass but the base, trimming the tiny shards off that before he declared himself full with a loud belch, and scooped up the dough. One of the guys wanted to look down his throat.

He was a radar technician. Frog claimed he had stood in front of the Search Antenna once too often.

The smirking Barber was in a corner of the room putting the make on an equally-large airwoman from the Accounts Section, his hand lightly resting on her hip as she leaned him against a wall. A cigarette hung from his lips and a last tiny bit of toilet paper still clung to the razor nick on his neck. He beheaded many pimples when he had shaved earlier, and had obviously overlooked this last little flag. He took a slug from her beer bottle, a drag on the butt and blew smoke in her face. That seemed to be quite a turn-on for the farsighted lady as she leaned into him and slid her fingers through the three-in-one on his hair. The king and queen of the prom, I thought.

Barber's romantic attentions recently had gone, you might say, down the hill, after FighterCop airwomen got the word out in the radar tower about his episode with Charlie Graham. Three feet away from sloppy Barber and his paramour, six people, arms intertwined, sang, "North Atlantic Squadron". The skipper was yet again vulcanized.

Roger, the day's victorious pitcher, had a table load of French-types weeping with laughter. Probably recounting the bizarre ballgame earlier in the day. "SALUT'UNTER! COMMENT CA VA TABARNAC!?" he hollered when I caught his eye. "DON' FORGET 'UNTER, " he said pointing at Rosie. "TWO 'AND!" They roared with laughter. So did 1.1 looked at Rosie but she hadn't heard him. Lucky for Roger. The party raged on.

Jerry Lee was about halfway through "Great Balls 'O Fire" when the plug on the box was pulled.

Jerry wound down like an old Victrola. "Too mucha love'll drive a man insaaaaaaa...".

"Plug it in, fer Chris...!" hollered a dancer who cut herself short when she checked out the plug puller. Inebriates' conversations suddenly were loud shouts as the room quieted.

"Jugs as big as ..." ended the last loud sentence. Giggles and hoots.

Standing beside the jukebox, plug in hand was our crew's Flight Commander, Flight Lieutenant Jack Fraser. Next to him stood our crew Chief, Sergeant Ed Carstairs. Both men were looking depressingly sober.

"HEY!" shouted Carstairs. "HEY!" again. "SHUDDUP! LISTEN!" He pointed at the windows.

The room was still going through an audio drop that took ten seconds or so, but before even the last whoops faded away, the sound of the alert siren crept in, distant at first. Now it sounded too damn close.

The nasty truth struck us all and we groaned and whined. We were going up the hill. Bobby's rumour had been right. "This is an Air Defence exercise alert!" said the Sarge.

"All Ops personnel are to be on the buses and four-by-fours leaving NOW for the radar site. Response time is vital so come as you Goddam well are! The Commander of 21 NORAD is on the base as you know! Everyone on the bus".

I looked over at Barber who stared at his new squeeze like he'd been hit with a wet fish. The mattress in the admin building basement would have to wait. She would thank her lucky stars in the morning.

To say that there was an immediate rush for the buses and four-by fours, would be a lie. We stared at each other looking around at other faces in disbelief for a few seconds, beers in hand, and mouths agape, our ties hanging off, white formal shirts stained with beer and ashes, women shoeless next to sweaty dancing partners, listening to the rise and fall of the cat-in-heat siren.

"Bye bye Scope dopes!" yelled one of the nerds from supply. The buses and vans started to honk their horns, and mixed with the alert siren's bleating, made a very urgent sound indeed.

## The Exercise

The bus ride was sheer chaos, with Carstairs frantically trying to keep some sort of order, and everyone else too pissed to even consider that a possibility. "North Atlantic Squadron" was sung at the top of our lungs and the cabin boy, the dirty li'l nipper, was mixed with the clank and clatter of dropped beer bottles and burps and squeals from the back. As we neared the last switchback, a brassiere flew from the back and draped itself over McLennon's head, causing howls for the driver to turn on the interior lights. McLennon calmly tied it under his chin and grinning crookedly, took an elaborate bow from the front of the bus before the sergeant got him back into his seat. He looked like a weird albino Mickey Mouse.

We finally stopped abruptly in front of the Ops building and fell off the bus. Four or five of us ran around the side of the tower and had a leak. I looked at the guy standing next to me. The Padre.

"Don't they call this the pause that refreshes, son?" he asked, chuckling at his own reverential ribaldry. "This too shall pass, padre," I said and he laughed.

Nice bus ride for a chaplain, I thought. Did Dad have rides like these? We got our passes from Sleepy the Commissionaire, who gave us a big grin and a wink, perhaps remembering back thirteen years or so to a mixture of bottles and duty in a bigger war. We shuffled up to the Ops room area.

The crew for midnight shift was on duty when the

siren blew, and now we had two more full crews of fifty each all hammered and milling around the coffee lounge and out in the hall, yelling and hooting and screeching and surreptitiously chugging beer that had been concealed in tunic pockets.

Rosie and I danced a slow one in the hallway. I knew the words to "Morning Side of the Mountain" pretty well, and sang them into her bobby-pins while mentally dancing with a Flying Officer. Rosie's jacket was open and her case for non-support was evident. McLennon had the evidence.

Carstairs showed up and announced we were to report to our regular positions and get scheduled for duty.

I went right to the radar report room. I had more experience pushing arrows around the plotting board, and should have gone there, but what the hell. My beer-induced flawed reasoning told me the last time I'd worked in radar report it was exciting, and I'd never worked scope during an exercise, right? So.

Rosie went to the Ops floor area to get skedded for plotter or tote board operation.

"Let me know when you're on break, or whatever, okay?" she said and grinned over her shoulder at me as she walked unsteadily into the noisy Ops room, bouncing and giggling.

I muddled over the implications of Rosie's farewell for a minute and then went upstairs to radar report. On the way I ran into a Sergeant who worked in radar maintenance. Somebody pointed him out in the snack bar to me once. He had some kind of weird stutter. It wasn't really a stutter, he just had trouble getting started. I said, "Whoops, I'm sorry!" as I bumped into him going around a stairwell and he said "OOOOOOOOOOOOH" for about twenty seconds before I heard the "KAY!" when I was one floor up. I also heard he had mistakenly left his hat in the Radome once, and someone microwaved it into a small pile of powder, topped by a badly singed brass albatross. Sgt. Delay, they called him.

As my eyes became accustomed to the darkness of the radar report room, I looked around and saw at least twenty-five guys waiting to hear a good reason why their Mess dinner-party had been screwed up.

"Okay, listen up!" hollered someone. "We're working four scopes in quadrants and two friggin' height finders! That's six guys! I need reliefs right now and we're workin' an hour on and dependin' how many's here, probably multi-hours off, I don't know yet."

He pointed at me. It was Cpl. Whassisname from crew one. "You and the next three guys besides ya, relieve them scopes right now. The rest of you guys write your names down on this sked here eh?" He glanced around and then said in a lower tone: "Who's got the beer anyways, eh? Jesus Murphy, youse all smell like a goddam brewery."

That drew a laugh and a crowd formed around an illuminated map table to sign names to a schedule. I walked over to the window to look down on the Ops room. The dias was full of wheels, including the Chief Operations Officer, the Commanding Officer and the Group Captain, all three smoking huge cigars and all either talking into phones or staring steely-eyed at the crowd of fifteen plotters, four of whom were phone-connected to the fourquadrant scopes and were jousting and sword-fighting with their plotting rods. The others stood around some corporal who was writing names on a schedule.

Charlie Graham was one of them. She looked up in my general direction and I waved, moving my face closer to the window to be in the light. She squinted through her cats-eye glasses for a second or two then recognizing me, smiled and waved back. Compared to the rest of us she was spotless, I noticed. Her tunic was done up and her tie was in place. She looked alert and as I watched her for a minute or so, a frown crossed her face when she looked at the crowd of partytypes goofing around. There's a proper time and a place, I could almost hear her say. Off to the edge of the milling plotters, Rosie jumped up on her chair to talk to someone up on the dias.

She had something on her shoe, I noticed. Just then one of the jousting plotters did too, and pointed at her shoe and laughed. Someone had lost their dinner somewhere and Rosie had found it.

Rosie simply stepped down from the chair, took her shoe off and pitched it toward the tote boards where it caromed off the weather board sending St. Hubert's wind direction and barometric pressure flying and leaving a pale yellow splotch where they had been. All eyes looked at the tote. The C.O said something to the sergeant. Rosie's shirt bounced and swayed like two small boys fighting under a sheet as she limped back towards her chair, angry and blushing.

Carstairs leaned over and said something to her through cupped hands. He looked like he was yelling. Someone bounced down onto the floor off the bottom level of the tote, picked up the shoe, and carrying it by a lace, disappeared behind die tote.

I relieved the guy on the northwest quadrant scope, the one that was expanded to just paint returns between 270 and 360 degrees. No unknown or bogeys had been sighted so far. Usually, in normal ops, when it's not busy, the trace sweeps from the centre, like a one-handed clock. If it's a little busy they'll just divide the scope in half, east-west without expanding them.

But now the trace seemed huge as it swept from the bottom up every twelve seconds, then vanished leaving the ghostly green azimuth and range markers to fade slowly.

I started to see double and tried to focus on the fading scope but the trace would come up suddenly and give my beery eyes a sort of big bright electronic uppercut. It came into focus if I closed one eye, I discovered, so I tried to close the one away from the supervisor's side.

My mouth was dry and I felt the beginnings of one of those exquisite headaches that immediately follows the combination of lots of beer, tobacco and noise. Funny thing you don't get the headache while experiencing the beer, tobacco and noise. Must be God's Party Plan. I smelled something soury-ripe and looked down at my shoes.

I could have sworn I'd stepped over it. I looked at the shoes on the guy next to me. Yup. Him too. I said, "I think you've got honk on your shoes."

He swung his head away from northeast quadrant scope for a second and gave me a silly grin and bobbed his head once; his red half-closed eyes never leaving my chin and said,

"You spect me t'fall fer that shit eh? Ha ha. An' how the hell would you kn-know eh?" He raised his eyes. Good God I thought, what's he doing here? This guy is absolutely polluted!

He continued: "You only g-got one fuckin' eye op-open! Haha! Anyways. So." His head lurched back toward his. scopeface. Good point.

My plotter had been keeping up a steady stream of gibberish at one of the other plotters not realizing her headphone switch was open. The chatter ran on about so-and-so grabbing her tits and did she see Rosie the pig in the back of the bus doing it with someone?

God, I thought. I felt a little disgusted myself. A little bra flinging, okay, but DOING IT in a crowded bus? She wouldn't go that far, I decided, and listened to the nasty rumour get started in my headphones.

The Corporal answered the phone and hollered that a strength three mid-Canada line break had occured and they were estimated our area in five minutes in the northwest quadrant headed southeast. He came over to me.

"That's you. What's yer name? Hunter? Okay kid; keep yer eyes peeled, and I'll get a dead reckoning from Ident on the bitches so's we know just about where they're gonna show." He was looking over my shoulder at the scope.

"And keep BOTH yer eyes peeled Hunter." He looked at me closely. "You got a problem with yer eye 'er what?" He had seen my flushed pirate-like mug. "Naw, just a bad habit." I said.

"Looks more like a bad beer to me kid!" He walked away smacking his head and saying, "Ha! What a goddam night to blow the siren! Jesus I've seen it all." He went to make his call.

Because of the expanded scope, the blips showed up about five times bigger than they ordinarily did on the regular scopes. "They're estimated to be about 350 degrees at maximum range!" shouted the corporal.

I switched eyes and stared at the maximum range marker at the scopes edge until my eye watered. Then the first pseudo-target painted on the edge. I hollered at the corporal and then passed the initial plot and the track number down to my plotter who seemed to be settling down a little. She asked me to repeat the initial plot position and then she resumed her mean little monologue.

I said, "Hey can you can the Smalltalk? I'm tryin' to think." She said "What? Train sink?"

I repeated myself.

She said, "I can't make out what you're saying, scope."

So I spoke very slowly and I ended with the hope that with removing the banana her hearing problem should clear up soon.

She replied, "Well perhaps you could spit some beer out and that might help matters, pisstank!"

What the hell does she mean by that? I'm Okay. Ain't I? She gossiped on.

The guy on totes came to and croaked: "Hey! H-H-Hunter. Izzit you?" A sodden Frog. Isn't anyone sober?

"Smee," I said.

"I though' th' it w-w-wass. I was thinnin' that yer v-v-voice was not...YER vice voice. Eh? Ov-over. Haha."

I switched off the plot line and buzzed the height finder and gave him the range and azimuth. He also asked me to repeat myself. Maybe I *WAS* the only one hearing me clearly after all.

The blips on the target looked like Yankee Stadium on the expanded scope and I made him at about 360 knots after five sweeps and then the second and third unknowns painted with only ten miles separation between each of them. They were more or less on the same heading for about ten minutes and then broke in three different headings, one due south, one southwest and one south-south west.

I gave initial plots and azimuth and ranges in a slow steady stream to our chatty plotter who continued to make Rosie's ears burn.

Maybe she just *THINKS* Rosie was doing it in the bus.

It was an easy time for the folks in the identification section as these guys had penetrated the mid-Canada line and had already been declared Unknowns. Good thing. That's where McLennon's supposed to work; in Ident.

It's hard to be taken seriously when your identifying

aircraft if you're wearing a bra on your head.

I was so excited I had both eyes open. I broke my grease pencil on the scope, but I peeled 'er off and plugged ahead passing those plots down every five sweeps, getting the guy over on heights to keep checking. I looked over at him once and he was fanning himself and making woo-woo noises as he put the cursor on the target paints.

They had scrambled the CF- 100's out of Bagotville, and I could expect to see these guys entering the picture very soon.

Dozey on the northeast scope was making noises to that effect now. "You be get these f-f-ffighters fum bagtown soon, eh?"

I looked over at him and he had a cigarette hanging from his lips as his head bobbed in swirls of green-tinted cigarette smoke and he passed plots down, speaking in low tones, repeating himself until once he screamed,

"JEEZ!

Canchoo unnerstan..fiig NINGLISH?"

He looked at my chin. "I hafta say ev... everythin' twi... twi.. TWO TIMES TO HER!"

Holy God. Do I look like him? Do I sound like him? Chances are pretty good but it looks O.K. from in here, I thought.

I was just about to pass more plots down to Chatty who was getting into the finer details of Rosie's love life when I heard a thump, then the muffled sound of a female yelling and then a headset hit the floor.

"Ho-ho-holy shit she sm-smucked'er!" said Frog on the line.

I risked a brief leap up to look out the window.

My plotter had broken for the door holding onto her face and Rosie stood yelling after her and waving her plotting rod. The dias people were standing and peering down, except for the 21st Norad Division Commander in Chief. He was asleep in his chair. How are we doing, sir?

Another plotter doubled up for the time being and put on the headset. Carstairs said something to our back-seat bus angel, Rosie, who looked just about ready to kill something. I glanced at the tote-board. To the right of one of my track numbers hung a bra with a black high-heeled shoe dangling from one of the C-cups. Frog had raised the flag.

"What's goin' on down there?" I looked over my shoulder at the corporal who'd just come over.

"Coupla plotters got into it." I said. " Everyone's sorta a little pissed."

"No shit." He went back to stand in the dark. I glanced at him. He was sort of sizing us up, me and the other goofy scopedopes, probably wondering why he didn't recognize us as complete mumblin' drunks at the beginning. Maybe this really is a test to see how we would perform half-crocked. Maybe he would call for reliefs early, I hoped.

Crockface on the northeast scope, who either was in worse shape than me or had recently suffered a head injury, passed me the fighter traffic so now my workload doubled. My head began to kill me. I asked the corporal if he could get me a cup of water or something.

"Gimme some too eh?!" said my neighbour. "Pliz?"

He brought me a yellow plastic coffee cup, said something about a hair of the dog and I took a long awful swallow of warm beer.

I handed it to Bozo who removed the cigarette with the inch long ash from between his lips, took a swallow, returned the cigarette to his mouth and holding the mug aloft grinned at the scopeface. He then said with great sincerity, "Jesus. Th' is th' way tha' we sh' be...when...so... to come... up..."

His face gished slowly into the scopeface, his cigarette breaking in two, the ashes and coal falling down to rest on the scope's rim.

The yellow coffee mug did a slow roll and four or five ounces of warm suds ran down into the innards of the scope. I heard a faint sizzle and the trace on his scope turned into a great green blob and disappeared.

The corporal was not amused.

"Shit! The man flamed out on the friggin' scope!" he said as he pulled Sleepy away, bouncing his head off the scope's shelf as he did so. The corporal grabbed him by the hair as he almost slipped to the floor. I noticed he had a grease pencil track number printed backwards on his forehead.

The good corporal rolled our friend over on his chair to some dark corner of the room, swearing a blue streak as he did so, then came back and mopped up what beer remained with a greasepencil rag. He then checked the roster, called down to the lounge and had a brief, heated conversation that ended with, "...I don't give a shit whether it's been an hour or a Goddam day. Get your ass up here now Davis!"

Then, in our direction, "Southeast quadrant! Adjust to northeast! Use his headset and take over for this flameout asshole here! I gotta call radar maintenance!"

Southeast, another bad example of airmanship whose hair stood straight up, topping a complexion that looked like a bad sunburn, reached over for the dearly departed's headset and burned his pinky on the butt lying in the scope rim.

Rising quickly and dancing briefly, he shook his hand and said very loudly: "OWWW! COCK KNOCKER!" Then he sat down to begin a series of abject apologies to his plotter and fumble with switches and dials to get his scope around to northeast.

"Where the hell is radar maintenance?" hollered the corporal, looking at his phone. "They don't answer ! It gets picked up and then this weird noise! The whole place is friggin' nuts!" Now a loud crash came from the dark corner as the ex-northeast scope and his chair part company. The corporal dragged him behind a height-finder, and ran smack into a height-finder operator's odious flatulence, who laughed and quickly blamed it on the comatose northeast scope-dope.

"I just dragged his ass over here, you rank shithouse! THAT'S been here for AWHILE!" The corporal held his nose. Per flatua ad astra. Sleep well Canada, your Airforce is awake. We're usually better than this. The corporal hollered something again about radar maintenance's phone being unserviceable. Again he says it sounds like it gets picked up, but all he hears is a buzz or something. He redials.

The fighters got three M.A.'s on the faker/bogeys and the new northeast scope picked up two more unknowns and they scrambled another pair of CF- 100's after them from Bagtown.

The fighters and the target aircraft are finally returned to base and things slow down a bit on my scope.

I can't raise Frog behind the tote board. The plotter says she thinks he's flamed out up there. I ask the new northeast to ask his tote to go wake up Frog.

The corporal is now hollering into the phone, "HELLO MAINTENANCE! HELLO! HELLO! THIS IS FRIGGIN' RADAR REPORT! HELLO!" He slams it down for about the eighth time.

"Somebody picks it up and then all I hear is a sound like rrrrrrr. I'm callin' the lounge for someone to go get

the jeezly radar tech!" said the corporal, dialing, then pausing.

"Jesus, we got a scope fulla beer! If one of you bastards says its anything else besides water it's my ass, so watch yer mouth."

"Five square! No sweat", we all said in a bleary chorus.

My new neighbour tells me Frog went to relieve himself and to get his own replacement.

We had just begun to restart meaningful relationships with our plotters and tote-board operators when the door burst open and my stairway friend Sergeant Delay ran in, carrying a toolbox. He took about five steps and then fell over the corner leg of the map-table, dropping the toolbox with a great crash. It opened and spilled screwdrivers and screws and old tubes all over the floor. He landed on his hands and knees beside the corporal. The corporal put his hand down to offer assistance to the fallen Sergeant and was brusquely pushed away.

Sergeant Delay slowly got to his feet. His bulging eyes became accustomed to the darkness and his face was very red as he raised a finger and pointed it at the zookeeper's nose. The corporal seemed to pale slightly and took a step backward.

" Hey lookit. I tried to raise you guys about ten frig ... "

The sergeant put his index finger across the corporal's lips. His mouth opened as he tried to speak. His tongue came out from between his teeth and stayed there. A vein stood out on his forehead. A mighty effort perhaps resulting in an accidental bowel movement, I thought, was to come forth. The room was silent save for the humming of the radar scopes. We waited.

They were frozen in a kind of weird tableau, as he strained the first word out, his finger silencing the

I was still crying when my relief came and I staggered down to the lounge, holding my gut.

## **Debriefings**

The week after the "mess-dinner exercise", as it came to be known, the C.O. called a de-briefing up the hill for everyone that had been involved. I came in just before it was called to order and found the last empty chair next to Charlie Graham. She smiled at me as I sat down, then made a face as if to say "here it comes".

We all expected to be in a world of shit, but he just got up and said from an operational point of view it had been a big success for the 24th Aircraft Control and Warning Squadron. He asked the Duty Controller for his comments and aside from some minor stuff concerning slow forward-tells on bogeys incoming into our sector or something, he was satisfied with the exercise itself. That was the last word he said, "itself, and it hung in the air, ominously.

Then the CopsO rose and clearing his throat and looking grim, said that he was the first to realize the timing on this exercise was bad, in view of the fact the other ranks were in the midst of a mess dinner. Under these circumstances he could understand why there was a certain level of, ahem, intoxication of operations personnel in the operations area. And maybe this has taught us something as far as operational readiness is concerned. People glanced at each other as a murmur started in the back.

Good God, I thought. They WERE testing us to see if we could hack it half-crocked!

"Quiet, please!" he said. "Now this does not excuse the numerous incidents that occurred in and around the operations room."

"The Commander-in-Chief seemed to be impressed with our operational capabilities, and was gracious enough not to mention the embarrassing incidents that happened."

"Mainly because he slept through the whole shlemozzle!" whispered Charlie. "He was part of the experiment."

The CopsO went on: "This will probably never happen again and from now on any stand-by crew caught in an operational area having recently consumed alcohol will be dealt with severely. The stand-by crew is the crew that will report for special alerts." He went on to mention the oncoming day shift had to clean up vomit behind the tote board and in the coffee lounge. Stifled laughter.

"Also," he said, "I have been led to believe that beer was consumed" (here a pause for emphasis) "CONSUMED! in the tower!"

Here one hundred actors took a sharp breath and frowned and shook their heads.

I glanced at Charlie. She looked at me and pursed her pretty lips and shook her finger and said "Bad bad boy!" under her breath. "Me?" I said feigning shock with a wide-eyed look. "Never!"

God she's nice, I thought. Just really nice.

"If this ever occurs again," the Old Man continued, "the culprits will be charged and if I have anything to do about it, released from the R.C.A.F.! AS YOU WERE!" He finished with that dramatic yelp, and we all filed out and got back on the buses and went down the hill.

Later, clusters of FighterCops sat in the snack bar down the hill noshing fries and burgers and re-hashing the now-famous "mess-dinner exercise". We were the talk of the Pinetree Line. This sort of thing did not happen. Perhaps the odd FighterCop would go on duty with a snootfull, but rarely. It was your job if you were caught. But if the Group Captain wanted to see how effectively we could operate crocked, as the scuttlebutt had it, he had to be impressed. When he finally awoke, at least.

There could have been major trouble on a mass scale about the accompanying sideshow, so perhaps that's why we were just warned, we surmised. I sat with a group of six or seven, listening to the buzz,, sipping a coffee.

On the Monday following the soirce Pritch had received a \$100 fine and fourteen days in the lovely Crowbar Hotel, Valcartier, Quebec. The beds there are at least as comfortable as a pool table. Thank you very much.

The Army Provost Corps, Pritch was discovering, did for enlightened incarceration what the Boston Strangler did for doorto-door salesmen.

We hoped the time wouldn't screw Pritch up. He was a good guy.

The Padre was rumoured to be among those who had partaken of the forbidden barley sandwich whilst in the tower. Holy moly!

Word had it he'd been asked to leave the intercept control room by some controller after he'd hung over his shoulder during the final few minutes of an intercept asking questions. He screwed the controller's concentration and he promptly blew the intercept. That was the only missed intercept of the entire exercise. Must have been to keep us humble. God works in mysterious ways.

Insulted, the good Father decided to walk down the hill and back to base. He arrived at the main gate guardhouse exhausted at four a.m. after a two-hour stroll down Mont Apica.

Dubois apparently spent a quiet few days in the

hoosegow taking quarters away from a meathead and for a while, Pritchard, in two-handed euchre. This was before, we were sure, his certain vacation in the military prison at Valcartier, and his eventual return to civilian life.

Somebody got a laugh when he sang, "Camptown Races" thusly; "Guess who got sent to jail today? Dubois! Dubois!"

There was now whispered hearsay that Rosie, that wonderfully generous collection of bobbypins and sensuousness continued her adventuresome night in the tower by taking an airman (literally and figuratively) under the dias where, a cache of old mattresses were kept in the event an exercise lasted more than twenty-four hours. She seemed to have the locations of mattressstorage facilities for the entire base. Either that or she could just recognize the scent of her own perfume from a great distance. Anyway, it was said they did it not three feet under the Groupie's chair and then promptly fell asleep and didn't wake up until about 10 a.m. die next morning, when the exercise was well over. So to speak. Having had trouble quietly locating their hastily discarded clothes in the pitch blackness under the dias, they made do with what they could find, and escaped.

They were seen wearing only one shoe each and were hatless; the gentleman was missing a shirt under his tunic. Both were tieless, sockless, nylonless and semi-bobby-pinless as they snuck under the fence behind the administration building. They were observed heading for their barracks having walked down the hill, unshod feet smarting from the gravel road, hiding from traffic in the woods and ditches all the way, someone said.

"Can you imagine?" it was asked.

"Who saw them?"

"One of the girls. You know, Heather whatsername

from Supply," said one of the gossips. " She saw her and this guy, she couldn't tell who it was, crawl under the fence, and she comes running in the barracks and he ran, he was limping- behind the admin building and then the mess hall and she didn't see him go into the airmen's barracks but he musta...right?" pondered the awful rumour-monger.

"It was Sunday morning. Everyone was flaked out after what happened and all, but she seen them and she says it's true. So help me God," as she piously held her hand up.

I decided to go out to the lobby at this point and check out what was showing at the base theatre.

Jesus, the bottom of my right foot hurt, but I'd be damned if I was going to start limping now.

## Goodbye/Hello

The northern Quebec summer softly lazed along. I took some leave and spent some of it at Sherbrooke with the folks and some time in North Hatley bumming around and waterskiing with Dunsmore, Goodson, Webster and McNeil; old high school buddies who could wail Kingston trio tunes with the best of them. Many-a-night were spent around a beachfire with a few Molson's handy. But they were part of a life that I'd left behind, and now we were fragmenting, going different ways, trying to keep that slippery grip on the past, but losing the tug of war just like everyone did, and does.

I felt each time we said goodbye that I had been more of a stranger to them during that visit. A military stranger with another life elsewhere, who spoke in strange acronyms. MacNeil and I borrowed his old lady's car one time and drove to Old Orchard Beach, Maine and slept in the graveyard just to save our beer money.

One rainy morning we woke to the marble-orchard's superintendent poking us with the business end of a shovel, requesting we leave quickly. We ended up at the midway down by the beach, and after a couple of greasy hamburgers for a hangover breakfast, made a bad decision and went for a ride on the spinning swing ride. We were the only two people on it.

The operator went away and left us on that thing going around for about half an hour. We started to get seriously airsick and hollered like hell, drawing a crowd in a circle around the base of this torturous contraption.

He finally came back, but not before we'd both

honked on the ring of upturned faces.

We had to run like hell. God, were they choked up. And messy.

When we got back to Sherbrooke we both lied and promised to stay in touch. I remember thinking how young he looked.

I arrived at Mont Apica to find we had a fourth roommate, just in from R.C.A.F. Station Edgar, near Barrie, Ontario. Nice spot. Tough to leave. His name; Walter Martin. Height; six-footfive. He could make a top bunk and look down at the sheets. He was assigned to our crew. We decided to call him Stretch.

Frog and Stretch and Bruce and I kept on the usual shift routines up the hill and occupied our days off with softball, drinking in the airmen's club, going to the show, goofing around in the snack bar, or trying to make time with somebody's daughter. Pritchard had long since returned from the military prison and still feeling his freedom, went to Chicoutimi on the supply truck one day. He came back smelling of the Saguenay Hotel's draft beer and carrying paper bags filled with about twenty coconuts. He then announced he was in possession of a recipe for coconut rum, and if we cared to help, he'd be inclined to let us share in the fruits of our labour.

This was a recipe Pritch claimed he'd heard about in the hoosegow at Val Cartier. He had been told of this amazing advancement in the art of rum-making by his cellmate, an army guy who'd gotten pissed and broken into his Commanding Officer's house to tell him a thing or two about the promotion system. Pritch says his cellmate learned it can work rather effectively, particularly in reverse.

The rum was made by sawing the tops off the coconuts, pouring in molasses to mix with the coconut milk, then replacing the top and securing it by wrapping the whole thing tightly with black electrician's tape.

The -trick then was to go dig a one-foot trench somewhere and bury the coconuts for about a month. We instantly turned into a rather efficient coconut rum assembly line and had the bounders underground in jig time, wrapped and hopefully fermenting.

While the coconuts cooked away beneath the grass behind Barrack Block three, I found a heady brew of my own.

One night at the snack bar a bunch of us were sitting with this guy from crew One named Ed, just shootin' the shit about the latest movie or something. Rosie showed up and asked me if I wanted to go see the radio station. She Looked at Ed and smiled and he said was going to go down and do a show in about ten minutes.

"Oh you're THAT Ed!" we said in chorus. Well!

Ed Walsh grinned the shy grin of the temporarily famous and looked down at his coffee.

He did a country and western show and played Hank Williams, Marty Robbins and Patsy Cline stuff until the cows came home, or until signoff, every Wednesday night. "Come hell 'er my water!" as said Ed on the radio.

I used to listen, not because I was nuts about country and western, but Stretch was, and it was his radio. Ed the D.J. was from Saskatchewan, and seemed like a good head. But we looked at him with different eyes. He was that guy on the radio, for God's sake! I'd seen him hanging around a thousand times. I didn't know Ed Walsh would look like that. He sounded like a taller man with sideburns and a cowboy hat. This guy was about five-foot-six with an angular, thin face. He slicked his brown hair back on the sides and into a duck-tail.

When it came time for Ed to get ready to go on the air, Rosie and I followed him downstairs into the studios of Radio M.A.R.S., which stood for Mont Apica Radio Station. It was the ongoing joke that some Martians had landed and claimed they had nothing to do with it. Radio M.A.R.S. ran entirely with volunteers. You get what you pay for.

Some Flight Sergeant was wrapping up "Big Band Dance Party" and we waited outside until the "On the Air" sign went out and then went in. Ed went right to work grabbing every album that had a picture of a horse or a bale of hay next to a cow-person holding a guitar. All the cowboys and girls were wearing a hat and a sequined silk shirt with a one-foot fringe on each sleeve.

Our Flight Sergeant was into his theme song, "In the Mood", and had already put his stuff away ahead of time. He bopped over to Rosie and I, snapping his fingers to Glen.

"Evening L.A.W. Bowens! Got us a new volunteer here, have you? Or you here to do some record cataloging again?" asked the Flight, looking from Rosie to me and smiling.

"Well maybe, Flight." said Rosie. "You never can tell. I'm just giving him a little tour now. John, this is Flight Sergeant Williams. He's in charge here."

I said hello.

"Well I am in charge hereabouts when I ain't runnin' the orderly room anyways! Where abouts you from son?" he asked.

When I said I came from Sherbrooke, Quebec, he narrowed his eyes and asked, "You aren't French are ya?"

"No" I said.

"Good. Them frogs got their own station to listen to from over in Chick-coot-timmy. We don't need'em here. But have a look around. We got a few holes in the ol' sked if you think you wanna give'er a shot, eh?"

I said thanks, I'd look around, but I didn't think I

could really be an announcer on the radio.

"Everybody says that!" said the Flight." But it ain't as hard as it looks! Right Ed? Hey Ed! Whoops!"

It had been silent in the room for a few seconds and we hadn't noticed. The mike had been on for Ed to start his show. Ed's show had started with "Right Ed? Hey Ed! Whoops!" An unusual beginning for a radio show and one that garnered attention from the listeners, no doubt. However, down the trail apiece, 01' Cowboy Ed would give us all an ending that became positively fabled in Canadian Armed Forces Radio.

Ed gave us a dark look over his shoulder, turned back to the mike and said in a voice suddenly Kentuckian, "Ha out thar youse country an' western fans! This is ol' Ed with the down home country show 'til midnat, come heller my water! Yee haw!" Then he rolled "I Fall To Pieces" by Patsy Cline.

He pronounced it Clan.

"Watch it with the 'water line' willya, eh Walsh?" said the Flight on his way out. "We got little kids in base housing listenin' fer God's sake, eh? "

"Ah'm sorra, flat sorgent." said Ed, now totally immersed in his radio cowboy persona.

So while Ed buckarooed through L'l Jimmy Dickens, Johnny Cash and Ferlin Huskey, I sniffed around the studios of the mighty Radio M.A.R.S. They had a lot of homemade-type equipment, but it seemed to work, and the shelves were crammed with 78's and 45's and LP's of every musical taste ever conceived.

I pulled one album off the rack simply titled "Welsh Mining Songs", featuring a group of black-faced miners all gathered around the mouth of some deep shaft. They were sort of standing at attention with their mouths forming extremely pink "0"'s, like blackened versions of the plywood choirboys I had seen on Sherbrooke lawns at Christinas.

They were The whatever Singers, the Welsh word having three l's, two w's, a t, and not many vowels. I wondered how OF Ed would handle the miners' names, if they should come out with a Welsh Cowboy Songs album.

Hung on the wall on a nail were long teletype copies of "Armed Forces News". They bore the stamp of the orderly room, so I supposed that's where they came from.

I found an "airshift" schedule, on a large calendar on the bulletin board. It had the days and times of all the transcribed prerecorded shows from the CBC (The Happy Gang, and Rawhide!) written permanently in ink. The local shows were grease-pencilled in on the plastic overlay. It looked like Friday and Monday nights they needed someone between eight and midnight. HELP! said a little note with an arrow pointing to the missing shifts.

Some of the other local shows included "The Homemaker's Hour with Jean and Georgette", "Midday Melodies", "P.M. Parade with Bob"," Hobby Time! with Sgt. Chips" and the always popular "Barracks Blast", the hit-parade show done every night except Wednesday by a cast of six with two missing, on Friday and Monday nights. I felt a tiny glow of expectation begin. Friday night is ten-cent beer call at the mess. Forget it. But Monday night?

I went over and sat on a squeaky couch in a corner to observe OF Ed ride those buckin' musical broncos down the ol' trail one more "tam". I thought about being in Ed's shoes and my palms got sweaty. Talking on the RADIO! Barracks-full and houses-full of people hanging on your every word, nodding in agreement as you dispensed volumes of useful information, slapping their knees and crying with laughter at your jokes! Then finger-poppin' to the latest hit you smoothly spin off that last knock-out punchline!

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Ed was actually pretty good and his accent didn't falter once, on or off the air. He'd give people the artist's birthplace, usually a cabin in the "heels" of either Tennessee or Kentucky, and then tell how they started. That was usually on some obscure radio station after they had played high school dances "from the age of eight, supportin' his Mama and twelve brothers and sisters after daddy got kilt in in the mans."

Those "mans" are the cause of a hell of a lot of music, I thought, from Nyllywttywlyth, The Welsh Town With Few Vowels, to Nashville.

Then Ed would roll the tune, and when he had a moment, talk in his curious cowboy accent to Rosie, who looked at him like he was a hot fudge sundae. But he had some time for me too. He showed me how the stuff worked; the turntables and the reel-to-reel tape recorder they played some of the transcriptions on; the others were on giant discs.

It wasn't all CBC. Some "Green Hornet" segments were in the files along with "Inner Sanctum" stuff, "Allen's Alley" and "Lone Ranger" episodes. God!

I remembered the time I got the big heck from Dad for leaning my head up against the RCA Victor Radio so much, I put a dent in the speaker fabric.

I had the Lone Ranger down pat in my head, and when he showed up on TV, it was much like seeing Ed in the snack bar for the first time. I liked the one in my head better. I went back to being seven, lying in my bed too scared to reach out from under the covers to turn off the Thing that was devouring small towns on "Inner Sanctum", on the radio. Me on the radio? No.

Also the shelves beneath the turntables, under a sticker that said "Hit Parade", were twenty 45's, all in little green cardboard envelopes that were numbered. I got down on my knees on the floor behind Ed to look. Good Golly Miss Molly it was The Holy Grail! The Hit Parade! The Stack'O 'Wax!

In grease pencil on the envelopes, someone had printed neatly:

July 31, 1958:

- 1. Patricia Perez Prado
- 2. Volare Dominico Modugno
- 3. Little Star The Elegants
- 4. My True Love Jack Scott
- 5. When The Kalin Twins
- 6. Hard-Headed Woman Elvis Presley
- 7. Yakety-Yak The Coasters
- 8. Purple People Eater Sheb Wooley
- 9. Splish Splash Bobby Darin
- 10. Poor Little Fool Ricky Nelson

PLEASE FILE THESE CORRECTLY. THANK YOU. C. GRAHAM.

Charlie worked here, I thought. That's neat. My eyes glazed as I stared at the list. I could hear Boom- Boom Brannigan from the Golden Studios of W.P.T.R. Albany, blasting up across the border.

"HEYYY GANG! ROCK 'N'ROLL WILL NEVER DIE! WE GOT THE PICK O' THE HITS, THE TOP O'THE POPS, SO DON'T TOUCH THAT DIAL! I GUARANTEE TO MAKE YOU SMIIIILE! FOR YOU JILLS AND YOU JACKS, BOOM-BOOM BRANNIGAN'S GOT STACKS O' WAX FROM THE GOLDEN HIT STUDIOS OF DOUBLE! YOU! PEE! TEE! ARRRR!"

As I listened to Boom-Boom in my head down on the floor beside Ed staring at the stack o' wax, I fell in love, then and there with Radio M.A.R.S. I had a sizeable distraction.

Ed rolled over my little finger with his chair while I was down behind him, and I don't think I felt it.

I watched 01' Ed like a hawk; watched his hands to see how the controls worked, watched how he pulled a record out of its jacket without laying a finger on a groove and slap it down on the turntable and cue up the next song, listening to the cue box. He'd slide the disc on the felt cover back and forth until it was cued to go as soon as he hit the switch.

He had some scripts and sometimes he read off the back of the album cover but he ad-libbed a lot, too. He would give the weather forecast that was on a little shelf in front of him and once in a while he would give the time.

"It's 'leven forty-fav, eastern daylat savins' tam." He cozied right up to the mike sometimes when it was a slow number he was getting into and Rosie's eyes would go to half mast as she watched him.

Then, he'd drop his voice a bit and say, "Here's Jim Reeves singin' about those Four Walls thet gits to us awl, once in a wall." A bad rhyme, but watching Rosie I could almost hear her laundry hit the deck.

I soaked up 01' Ed's actions like a sponge. I wanted to do this, badly. Sweaty palms or not.

I asked him how long he had been working here.

"Ever since ah arrahved. 'Bout a yar now," said Ed, still in Kentucky. He stayed in Kentucky until we all left together after sign-off.

The door had just closed behind us when Ed instantly reverted back to Canadian bland. "Well, I hope you're interested in joining us, John. We certainly could use the help."

He was back, just like that; back up north in record time.

The three of us walked down the road to the barracks together, and I went in, leaving Rosie and Ed talking under a streetlight.

## Charlie

People were starting to tell me they liked my version of "Barracks Blast" on Radio M.A.R.S. I had learned to humbly smile and say thanks and quietly stare into my beer in the club when these compliments came my way. I obviously had a good audience on Monday night. People were recovering from the weekend, I guessed, not like Friday nights during beer call. I would get requests and dedications written on little slips of paper and handed to me in the club for me to use on my next show. Some were gag dedications, some, messages of love.

"Play Splish Splash for Rosie. Get moist in the bathtub with the Frog." Frog, of course, would have no knowledge of this until I put it on the air and then I'd get a world of trouble from Frog in the barracks later. But then he would write one about someone else, and if it wasn't too raunchy, I'd put it on.

Sometimes one of my smart-ass remarks or lame attempts at humour would get some response. I was always happy that they would say anything. Radio was great, I was discovering.

One night a week, and sometimes more if someone couldn't make it, I was a bona fide DISK JOCKEY. Sometimes I read the news that we picked up at the orderly room twice a day. Then, of course, I was AN ANNOUNCER.

I was spending a lot of extra time at Radio M.A.R.S, farting around in the record library, helping make out the

hit parade lists (stolen directly from the Saturday Montreal Gazette) and helping to sort records and categorize them in a file card system. Rosie was there occasionally, but Charlie Graham was also a volunteer and she would be there doing some show preparation with her co-host, a married woman, every now and then. They did a kids show on Saturday morning, "CALLING <u>ATT.</u> KIDS!" They read the comics and did some crafts and sang happy birthday to all the little weeners listening up in die permanent married quarters.

One morning in the middle of the week I went down to see if anything needed doing in mighty M.A.R.S., just to kill some time. I ran into charming Charlie Graham. She was sitting at a small desk scripting her part of the kids show and also running the transcripted shows on the air that morning.

The "Rawhide" tape was rolling on the reel-to-reel. OF Max was holding forth, sounding like a hip Gabby Hayes.

Charlie said a smiling "Hi" and told me she enjoyed my show, and I said I thought that she and her friend made a lot of air force brats happy too.

We small-talked for a while, talking about who was on what shift, and about messhall food, and the club's last party and the latest flick in the base theatre.

"Rawhide" was just about finished and Charlie went over to cue up a transcription record of "Juliette", waited for "Rawhide's" theme to close, and hit the turntable switch. Enter Our Pet, Juliette.

I went to the snack bar and grabbed two coffees and came back. I asked her where she was from.

"Calgary. Well, sorta a little south of Calgary." She smiled her great smile again. "Ever been to the Stampede? It's great!"

"Never been farther west than Montreal," I

confessed.

"Have you ever been to Newfoundland? That's where I was born."

"Never been farther east than good ol' Mont Apica, Newf!" She laughed, and we told each other about cowboys and codfish, and our schools and our friends.

I had been standing, leaning up against the wall, and I unfolded one of the stacking chairs that was propped up nearby. "Mind if I sit down? Maybe you can explain the weird filing system to me. I can't find a record if my life depends on it." That was a lie, of course but I wanted a chance to talk to Charlie Graham since my first day on base; the day Barber had embarrassed the hell out of her and had paid for it.

"Well, you bought." She toasted me with her cardboard cup of coffee. I turned the chair around and sat backwards with my arms folded over the backrest. Charlie explained a few things to me that I already knew, and I nodded and smiled.

There was a pause while she took a sip of her coffee.

"So what brings Charlie into the R.C.A.F.?"

She looked down for a second with a tiny frown and then brightened a bit and gave me a half-grin. "Oh well. My life would not have been complete without dear Corporal Barber and his lovely friends on crew two, you know, John."

1 assured her that almost everybody hated the nerd and if I were her I'd put in for a crew transfer, maybe go to the CopsO, or whatever it took.

"I thought about asking for a transfer, but why should I have to? I've some good friends on crew two, and if anyone should leave, it should be Barber."

She said she was going to talk to him, perhaps try to reason with him, and find out why he and a lot of men - mostly corporals and sergeants - picked on the airwomen constantly.

If the talk didn't work, she said she was going to try to talk some of the other airwomen into filing a redress, a sort of petition or official group complaint, to the CopsO.

"Is it that bad on crew two?" A redress was considered pretty serious stuff.

"On crew two? Where have you been hiding, John?"

I shrugged.

"They shaft the airwomen in the air force every chance they get! We get less pay for doin' the same job. We get patronized when we ask for more responsibility than it takes to push shitty plotting arrows! How many female corporals and sergeants do you see lately anyways?" She was starting to raise her voice.

I shrugged again and started to mumble something.

"One! One female crummy corporal on the whole base! And you guys can go out and sleep with every woman in Chicoutimi and come back with a social disease and all you'll get is a shot of penicillin and a slap on the wrist from the Medical Officer! If it gets around that an airwoman has a roll in the hay, or God forbid gets pregnant, they throw her out for Christ sake!"

Now she was really angry. She paused and took a deep breath.

"They talk dirty around us, embarrass us, try to feel us up and the only thing sometimes I think they want is....!"

She stopped and put her hands to her reddened face.

"Jesus. I'm sorry. It makes me so mad, that's all," she said, throwing her empty cup in the can, hard.

"Some of the girls say, 'Oh that's life'! Well I could just kick them!" She gave me a rueful look.

"I guess that would put me in Barber's league though, wouldn't it?"

"You wouldn't want to be in that league," I said, thinking, Barber, you dumb asshole, you've picked on the wrong airwoman this time. Good luck, jerk.

I pulled out the Export A's. "Wanna smoke?" I held the open pack toward her.

"No thanks." I lit mine with the Zippo with the R.C.A.F. crest.

"Nice lighter. Where'd you buy that?"

"Upstairs in the little gift shop."

She stared at me for a few seconds. There were beautiful eyes behind the black frame cats-eye glasses.

"You know, for some reason, I trust you. I'm probably making a mistake, though. But you seem like a nice guy."

"I think you can trust me," I said, feeling my face flush. What's this? Who Do You Trust? Say the magic word and....

"If I tell you something, promise you'll keep it to yourself?"

"Yup." This better be good.

"Promise."

"OK, I promise! Cross m'heart n'hope t'die!" I flung cigarette ashes across my shirt crossing my heart. I brushed frantically.

She didn't smile.

She looked down at her hands. "I've come to the conclusion that running away from something doesn't make it any better. So, I'll be damned if I'll ask for a Crew transfer. I'm through with that crap." She looked wistful, her eyes misting over.

Oh-Oh. This is definitely going to be a Dear Jill. I was wrong. It was much more than that.

What I heard was a load of heartache.

"Here's what gets Charlie into the R.C.A.F." She spoke quietly, looking down, occasionally raising her

eyes to meet mine for a second.

Charlie and her boyfriend had planned to get married and buy a little farm up near some place halfway between Calgary and Edmonton. Red Deer, I think she said. He fixed farm equipment and was doing pretty well. They had even picked out a place with about fifty acres, fronted by a real nice little house, right beside the highway. She had known him since high school.

Her father had hated this guy from the beginning because he was an Indian, and told her to break it up or get out of the house. So she'd seen this guy "on the sly", as she put it, for about three years.

The guy asked her to marry him and she'd said yes. She loved him a lot, and they had found the little farm, full of hope and love.

She phoned him the day after he proposed to ask if he would come down to meet her parents and try to talk some sense into her old man. She showed her Mom the ring she kept hidden in her jeans pocket, and her mother had hugged her and said perhaps if Dad met the young man, he'd understand what a nice young fellow he was, that they weren't all drunks and bums. So she'd called him and asked him to come. Bill, she said his name was.

She told her father then about Bill and the proposal and he went berserk. He said she had been carrying on behind his back after he told her to stay away from that "yahoo" and he didn't want the kid to put a foot inside his door.

She begged her dad to just meet him once to talk to him and see what a great guy he was. But the old man said if she knew what was good for her she better get to the end of the driveway to turn Bill around, cause he didn't want to see him now or ever.

Charlie and her Mom walked to the end of the drive to wait for Bill. Her mother told her to give her dad some time.

He'd come around, she was sure. This was just too sudden and all.

They waited a long time for Bill, and then, believing he had gotten cold feet and changed his mind, finally went back into the house.

Her father never did have to meet Bill.

Bill was only two or three miles from Charlie's place that afternoon when he was hit head-on by a truck headed for Medicine Hat with a load of cattle. He was dead on arrival at the hospital.

Her father wouldn't take her to the funeral, and told her the sonofabitch got what he deserved for hangin' around white women.

Some of Bill's buddies came down to get her to take her to the funeral and her father had threatened them with a gun. She packed a bag later that night, walked out of the house to the sound of her mother's wailing and her father's shouts and she never went back. She lived in Calgary with friends for about six months.

She called home just once, to tell her parents she was joining the air force. Her father wouldn't talk to her and gave the phone to her mother who told her she musn't be angry at her Dad. He'd always been good to her.

Charlie put on this face then and talked like the universal Mom. "She said 'Oh Charlene, we both can't understand why you'd hurt us so by leaving. We miss you. Now you're going to be joining the services and sent to God knows where. Please come home. I know I can make things better between you and Dad, Charlene.'" "That's what she said to me." Charlie sighed. "They couldn't understand why I left. Shit." She shook her head. There were tears on her cheeks.

"I write her a letter once in awhile, but that's all." She wiped a tear from the rim of her glasses. "She never writes me back. He probably won't let her."

Her lower lip quivered a little.

I didn't know where to look, so I just stared at the lighter I'd been fidgeting with since she began. She took a deep shuddery breath. "So I've lost all three of them, really. Bill, my Dad and my Mom. He won't let her call me or anything. My Dad is a good man and he always treated me and Mom with respect but that was an awful mean thing he did. If only he'd say he's sorry." She sniffled into a Kleenex. "He could have let me go to the funeral."

I nodded, affected by her story and remembering how I learned at scout camp when I was 10 or so of my grandmother's death. Missing the comforting hugs at home. The coldness of the scoutmaster's attempt at condolence.

"Be a good scout and be brave, Hunter. No need for tears." Running into the woods to lie on the mossy ground and crying my heart apart. "Oh Nanny. Oh Nanny."

What terrible things to carry around, Charlie, I thought.

"What terrible things to have to carry around." I said it out loud.

"I haven't even told my room-mates. Sometimes when I'll start to cry I tell them I'm just depressed or something." She was unfolding and folding a Kleenex.

"I don't know why I haven't told them. It's too painful for me, as you can see. Too personal...or something, I don't know." She blew her nose.

"I miss my Dad believe it or not. And I miss my Mom, and Bill...well shit if it wasn't for me, he would <u>still</u> be around, wouldn't he? I killed him as sure as if I'd got a gun an..." She lost it then and turned her back to me and started to cry hard, her shoulders shaking. I put my hand on her back very lightly. "I'm really sorry, Charlie," I said, weakly. She took a fresh Kleenex out of her purse and settled down a bit. She took a deep breath.

"So now you know why I'm not putting in for a crew transfer. I am not leaving anything again, John. I've had enough running away. Maybe I can make Barber see the light. Nobody should treat anyone like that."

She gave me a slight smile and looked up at me with redrimmed eyes. "I'm not having much success with men lately, am I?"

"Well, at least this one bought you a coffee," I said. "And I wish I could say something to make you feel better. You know, like when Ward Cleaver talks to Wally and the Beaver and solves everything and they all laugh?" She started to smile, but couldn't quite manage.

The door opened and the host of "Midday Melodies", a Corporal from the orderly room bounced in with the news under one arm and his lunch under the other.

"Hey you guys! Brighten up! You look like yer best friend died! Hey Charlie! Cpl. Barber's up in the snack bar. You got a date with him or what? Heh heh!" We glared at him.

I almost said something, but Charlie gave me a look and I held back.

As Our Pet Juliet did her closing song, Charlie put her stuff away and prepared to leave. She said she didn't feel much like writing the kids' show right now and was sorry she had bent my ear.

"But thanks for listening, John," she said looking into my eyes with a faint, sad smile.

"Anytime, Charlie." She walked towards the door, and stopped, looking at the corporal. "For once, Corporal after your show today, file your records so I don't have to do it for you again, okay?"

As the door closed, the corporal glanced at it and

then back to me.

"Nice.lookin' broad, but pushy."

What a coincidence, I thought. We were just talking about

you.

"Push this, asshole," I said, giving him the finger as I walked out.

"Hey you can't talk to a cor..."

The door shut. I was out of there, and he was on the air. Juliette was done for the day.

## Now You See It

The fall in northern Quebec is a beautiful season. What skinny maples they have there all burst into flame-like colours. The air is crisp and the vampirish black-flies are gone. The air is so clean and clear that sometimes, when on coffee breaks up on the roof of the Ops tower the visibility had to be at least seventy-five miles.

We'd stand below the radomes, safe from the radar energy, but it still afforded a much better view than at ground level, being four stories higher. The fall crimsons and golds around us were astonishing.

We'd sit, our legs hung over the roofs edge and smoke and sip out of our cardboard cups and look out over the rolling hills stretched before us. The top of Mont Apica had been blown clean off during construction, leaving behind a flat circular lot. The Ops building and the other two radomes were situated on the southwestern edge. Three sides of the building faced a busturnaround area and a small parking lot. One side fell almost straight down a sheer cliff maybe 300-feet deep. Jackpine tops waved in the wind far below. All the shift crews came up here once in a while to get some fresh air and shoot the shit.

Conversation would then begin with mumbled remarks about the surroundings or the weather or another individual, one usually in a supervisory position, or perhaps of the opposite sex, or someone who has performed a monumental screw-up of the highest magnitude. This would then move on to spitting over the edge, loud farting and more throwing roof-gravel. An always-favourite diversion was spotting distant objects, and trying to get the others present to see what you hadn't seen at all, of course, as these objects would be totally imaginary.

Stretch Martin was the champion at this. After convincing squinty-eyed people (who thought they were in need of a white cane) into saying they saw some imaginary thing he was pointing out, he'd do it. The moment they even leaned towards an imaginary sighting confirmation, he'd immediately tell diem it was all bullshit, it wasn't there at all, and laugh till he wet himself. Stretch liked to do this in conspiracy with others present whose credibility had already been stretched, so to speak. He would do this anywhere at anytime, but of course it only worked once per customer, and he'd just about covered everyone by the time it was my kick at the eyechart.

There was always a low-key start. Shoot the shit and then...THE SIGHTING. It could be almost anything. A small airplane, or an animal of some sort.

Once it was a bird; an alleged eagle.

He'd cut a sentence short while staring into the distance, middle or far.

"She's got the loveliest set of...hoooolyshit lookatthad" He'd point, eyes wide.

"Hooolyshit!" The other conspirators present would chorus.

What?" I'd say, looking hard in the direction Stretch's pointed finger.

"Out on one of those two little pine trees. The eagle. See it? Big as a friggin' house! Jesus!" Stretch whistled.

"I can't see any eagle," I'd say, squinting into the distance, my hand shading my eyes. "Where is it?" "And yer workin' radar report?" one of the others said shaking his head.

Another piped in, "Isn't that a sight fer sore eyes! An eagle! Never thought I'd see one of those!" "Holdit, you guys. I'm lookin' in the wrong place. I can't see any eagle! Where is it?"

"Look," Stretch sidled up next to me, pointing. "Look, Hunter! You're as blind as a jeezly BAT! For five minutes that goddam eagle been sittin' in that nest over there! OVER THERE! Look, see the hill next to the hill with the big pine tree? See the two little pine trees about halfways up the hill there? See that!? See?"

"Yah." I could see the trees all right.

"OK! Now look up on top of that tall one, there! See the Eagle? Look for Chris sakes! He's flappin' his wings! SEE THAT!!? SEE?"

"Nope." I couldn't see the eagle.

"YOU GOTTA BE KIDDIN ME! JUMPED-UP JESUS!" he hollered. "I DON'T BELIEVE IT! YER BLIND!" Stretch's back-up group would cluck their consternation. Then, lowering his voice, "Hunter you lookin' at the right tree? Look where I'm pointing. THERE! YOU SEE THAT HUNTER!!?"

"I can't see it." What the hell is going on? Everyone is seeing this eagle but me....

I asked around. "Bob, can you see an eagle?" Bob nodded at me, looked me right in the eyes, face as straight as a tax auditor. "Sure I can. Big one, bald- headed kind I think."

Stretch started again. "God, it's HUGE! JIMMY YOU SEE IT DONCHA?"

"Oh yeah! Wow! What a sight, eh!" Jimmy looked impressed.

"HUNTER! JESUS! LOOK IN THE TOP OF THE TREE! IT"S SWAYING FOR CHRISSAKE! SEE IT? SEE IT !?"

Everybody was seeing this thing except me. Time to blindly acquiesce and get on to something else. Maybe I need new glasses.

"Yah."

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"YOU SEE IT?"
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"Yup."

"AIN'T IT BEAUTIFUL?"

"Yah."

"WELL IT AIN'T FRIGGIN' THERE!"

Stretch went into paroxysms of laughter, lying down on the gravel roof and holding his belly. The others just chuckled and guffawed and pointed, having been there.

Stretch considered this one of the highest forms of humour. Almost every time he saw me from then on, he would ask me if I'd seen any eagles lately, and then chuckle and shake his head. He was merciless. I used to wonder how he kept all the various victims with their alleged sightings separate in his mind. I'd hear him ask other people if they'd seen any crows, or rabbits or bears.

One night in the fall, not long after I'd spotted the mystery eagle, crew three was working an evening shift. Not much was going on. The controllers had a couple of birds up out of Bagtown doing practice intercepts. I was working radar report and was following the CF- 100's progress as they were guided through their intercept patterns by a controller over in weapons.

I passed the range and azimuths of the fighters and the rest of the civvy passenger traffic down to the plotter, and it looked like the fighters would be headed home soon. They'd been at it for a while and they had to be getting low on fuel.

I was almost due to be relieved when someone called over from the intercept control room with word that there was going to be a bubble check, if we wanted to go up for a look.

A bubble check was parlance for a low fly-past by a fighter over a radar site, ostensibly so close that the pilot could check our bubbles, or radomes, for holes.

This was illegal as hell, of course, and the only purpose they served was NOT to check for radome holes, but to give a jet jockey his jollies, and give us a glance at an actual flying aircraft rather than a green blob on a scope.

But nobody rushed up to see it this time. The Golden Hawks had done a show for the base recently and we'd had a few bubblechecks in the summer months just past, so a low flying "Clunk" didn't appeal to many this time around.

Also there was a hot euchre game going on in the coffee lounge. World War Three might have interrupted a hot euchre game. Might have.

My relief came, and I thought, what the hell. Might as well go up to see this guy. Sometimes they get pretty close and it's a laugh.

I walked down the hallway to the firedoor that led up to the roof and climbed the stairs. Stretch, McLennon and Frankie, one of the airwomen, were sitting on the edge of the roof, quietly talking in the dying rays of a glorious sunset, pointing and talking. Stretch was laughing. I paused for a second.

The aircraft had been practicing their intercepts to the north.

"Hey Stretch!" I shouted, walking towards the group from the stairwell. "There's a bubble check cornin'!"

"Which way?" asked Stretch, as all three scrambled to their feet.

Here's my chance, I thought. "From the uh.... south! It's coming in from the south!"

Stretch scurried over to the south edge of the roof

first.

I touched Frankie and McLennon on the shoulder and pointed north, then put my finger to my lips. They both instantly understood, winked at me, and went over to Stretch's side.

Behind them, I glanced over my shoulder to the north and could just make out a faint smoke trail. Couldn't be more than thirty seconds out, I thought.

We stood below and between two of the three huge golfballlike radomes. Stretch, Bruce and Frankie each had a hand shading their eyes, squinting into the southern distance. Frankie and Bruce were grinning slightly.

Oh God, please help me squelch this long streak of bullshit once and for all...

"There it is!" I hollered. "See it? About three miles

out!"

"Where? Where is it?"

"Look! See that mountain there with the logging slash in it?" "Yah!" said all three.

I glanced over my shoulder. Now there was a large smoke trail and the sun glinted off the nose of the CF-100 as it bore down on us at 350 miles per hour.

"Well, see the smoke above it? Look, Jesus, it's cornin' right at ya, Stretch! SEE IT! HOLY KEERIST!"

"Oh yeah!" said Frankie. "Look at that!"

"Cornin' in like a FRIGGIN' FREIGHT TRAIN!" said Bruce McLennon.

"See it Stretch? Huh?"

Stretch squinted into the distance. "I can't see the goddam thing." Then, turning towards us with his hands on hips: "Oh sure! Don't bullshit a bullshitter! You guys are pullin' my pisser," he said. Nobody turned to look at him.

"THERE IT IS STRETCH! NO SHIT! LOOK FOR

GOD'S SAKE! SEE IT?" I cried. I think he's on to it, I thought. Stretch started to say something but then his head cocked from side to side like a dog as he could now just barely hear the almost inaudible whisper-hiss of a fighter jet as it comes toward you.

I glanced over my shoulder. It was maybe five hundred yards away, just smokin at us', the cockpit gleaming between those big engine intakes.

Don't turn around Stretch, I prayed.

"SEE IT STRETCH!? SEE IT?" I hollered into Stretch's ear as he peered into the deep south.

"I....I THINK I CAN HEAR THE BUGGER! YAH! YAH! THERE IT ..." The roar of the CF-100 Canuck was a huge enormous shaking blast that almost covered my yell into Stretch's ear as it passed over Stretch and all of us from behind.

"WELL IT AIN'T FRIGGIN' THERE!" I screamed. The roof shook.

Stretch jumped a good foot straight up and screeched.

The aircraft was banked on his starboard side almost to the vertical and pulling up. He was low enough to give us one splitsecond glance of a helmet in a cockpit, and as he hit the afterburners flames shot out of the engines. He did a couple of barrel rolls and flew out of sight.

Stretch hollered like a man possessed. Matter of fact, if McLennon hadn't grabbed him, he'd have fallen off the roof.

"Hoooooly shiiiiit," he said, bent over, his hands on his knees. He was pale. "Scared the livin' shit outa me..."

Frankie and Bruce and I held onto our guts and staggered around laughing, gasping for breath, shouting "IT AIN'T FRIGGIN' THERE!"

Stretch recovered quickly, and chased me around the roof and down the stairs and through the ops building for

at least a half an hour before he caught me.

By that time he was pooped and gave me a half-hearted noogie and laughed at himself.

The pilot was probably having a great time telling everyone about the bubble check he did with all of the dumb scope-dopes facing the wrong way.

Later, on the way down the hill in the bus, Stretch promised he'd get even. I told him we WERE even. Maybe he was just shootin' the shit.

## Lest We Forget...Coconuts.

November 11, 1958 we had a hell of a snowstorm. It had just started to snow as our half of the crew came off midnight shift at eight a.m. We were required to participate in the C.O. 's Remembrance Day parade. It was snowing so hard the parade was moved inside the rec centre, where we all clattered about hollering and marching and getting confused and bumping into each other. Both Padres spoke and led us in prayer to honour the memory of those in uniform killed in previous wars.

Some of the senior NCO's and a few officers had been in the Second World War, and they were there, medals clinking as they marched. To most of us, all we knew about war is what we had seen on "The Twentieth Century" with Walter Cronkite narrating, the war of marching captured Nazis, of creeping soldiers running from building to crumpled building, of streams of bombs raining down on their target, the crew that returned, posing, thumbs up and grinning, beside the crippled bomber. The Korean "conflict", Canadian soldiers dying on frozen hills. The wars that were in black and white.

The next one would be in colour. The notion that we might have to die for Canada was as remote to us as it would have been to some garage mechanic over in Chicoutimi. We'd been told it was a possibility. So was getting hit by lightning, as far as we were concerned.

Of course, if Ike and Uncle Joe had decided to heat up the Cold War, I suppose we would have been the

targets. It had only been a few years since they built all those new graveyards, and perhaps Ike and Joe were into healing. But you'd never know it by reading the papers.

But we stood at attention for the sad trumpeter and bowed our heads for the minute of silence.

We fortunates born around 1940 were too young for both Wars that followed so we didn't go into a Remembrance Day parade with medals to clink or personal experience to go along with our freshly-pressed uniforms and shiny shoes. But most of us knew someone; a father or an uncle who had come back, perhaps missing parts, or didn't come back at all.

I thought about my two uncles, Fairley and John. They were just very dim memories to me, but neither survived. They had both been in the R.C.A.F., and one of my earliest memories is going up Signal Hill in St. John's to fly a kite with my Uncle John. I remember his blue uniform. He took off his Officer's hat so it wouldn't follow the kite. Later he put it on my head, and it came down over my eyes. I gave him a little salute.

The wind blew that big kite high out over the stormy sea and I had to grip the string in both hands, Uncle John on his knees holding me in a bear hug so I wouldn't go up with it. He held my little hand in his big one, the wind blowing our clothes and hair as we watched and cheered and laughed as the kite danced in its flight in the grey Newfoundland sky.

Uncle John.

He'd only be about forty now, I thought. A lump came to my throat.

The parade was dismissed and we trudged through the mounting drifts to the Airmen's Club to listen to war stories from the old sweats. We listened with admiration and assumed envy, secretly glad it was them, and not us.

Leaning on the bar, I listened to a guy named Sawyer

from Crew One talk about a Remembrance Day parade he'd been in at the base in Foymount, northwest of Ottawa. He said they were all bused to Eganville, a small town he says was separated three ways. By religion, the railroad and the Bonnechere River. He swore that every year on Orange Day, July 12, the Catholics and the Protestants would meet in pitched battle on the bridge, beating the living bejeesus out of one another with sticks and clubs and throwing each other into the river. Then they'd retire to the Legion where periodic flare-ups would occur until the place was closed, and the Ottawa Valley boys would go home to nurse their wounds.

On parade day all troops from R.C.A.F. Station Foymount filed off the buses, and stood on the tracks which ran down the centre of Eganville's main street.

There is a parade drill called "sizing by flights", wherein a flight of three ranks, on the command "tallest on the right, shortest on the left in three ranks, SIZE," is expected to sort itself out to conform with the request. In other words you quickly bumble around finding hats taller than yours and stand to their left, so that upon completion the flight of 30 or 40 bodies now has three ranks with a nice neat downward slant from left to right, as you face them.

The Flight Sergeant's job is to then stand at the end of each rank, and after ascertaining that each rank is in a straight line, shouts out to the parade commander,

"Front rank steady!

"Centre rank steady!"

"Rear rank steady!"

The commander then hollers, "Parade steady!", and we begin to march, quite unsteadily.

The problem in Eganville was that when the troops lined up after sorting out who was taller than who, they lined up in two ranks, not three, and when the hapless Flight commander turned sharply on his heel to straighten out the third rank, it was not there.

The crowd of Eganville's most patriotic Catholics and Protestants watched expectantly as die sergeant mulled over the possibilities. The C.O. stood beside the Mayor, two medal-laden Legionnaires and the tiny grey-haired Silver Cross Mother, all surrounded by wreaths ready to be placed at the foot of the memorial. The C.O.'s eyes began to dart about as the seconds ticked by, and then they settled on the flight sergeant who commanded the flight that stood at attention on the tracks in the middle of Main Street.

"Flight Sergeant! What is the problem?" shouted the Wingco.

"Where is the Goddam third rank?" The Sergeant looked expectantly at the two rows of blue.

A few giggles came from the crowd, then silence.

Then, someone in the second rank spoke up. "The train went through Sarge!"

It was one of the few times that the Catholics and Protestants of Eganville, Ontario shared a good laugh together.

Sawyer smiled wryly as he told us the C.O was not amused, and confined everyone in that flight to base for a week. He said this Winco was crazier than a shithouse rat anyway. He'd have barracks inspections with no notice, parades every week and would even go to the mess parking lot three nights in a row and write down license plates. If yours was there at least two out of the three, you were called in to discuss your alcohol problem.

A lot of the single guys, who might be there to just watch TV or shoot pool got called in, Sawyer said. He'd been one of them.

We drank all afternoon, listening to similar tales of years gone by and someone grabbed a couple of trays of sandwiches.

I stayed for a while longer, but the beer and the midnight shift were catching up with me.

The dayshift of FighterCops from up the hill came in about two hours later, frozen and covered with snow. The road up the hill had iced up pretty badly and coming down the bus driver lost it. He realized he wasn't going to make one of the switchback turns and simply rubbed the bus's right side against the wall of the cliff. It was that or miss the curve and fly a busload down a hundred-foot gorge. This time nobody got any glass in the face, but one of the airmen twisted his ankle.

A couple of people ran back to the transmitter site to call for help, but the help couldn't get up the hill, so they had to walk down to the bottom, carrying the ankle injury.

They were mighty thirsty and the party's second shift took over as the Remembrance Day ranks became decimated.

Stretch, Frog, Bruce and I went back to barracks and fell into our bunks, drunk and exhausted.

We woke up at eleven at night, hungover, dressed in a hurry and struggled through the drifts to the mess hall for the late meal before going back up the hill.

They took us up in an Arctic Cat, a kind of huge snowmobile with an enclosed plywood cabin. It roared up the clearing on the side of the mountain made for the hydro-electric towers, banging us around the inside like ten peas in a rolling rain barrel. Mercifully, it was faster than the usual bus trip, but my head was throbbing from used beer before I got into this thing, and now it was really pounding.

The combination of my head banging against the plywood wall and exhaust fumes coming in through the floorboards caused me to lose the late dinner upon arrival, in the snow. I was lucky though, and pulled the 4 to 5 and 7 to 8 a.m. shifts in radar report, and jumped at the chance to flake out behind the height finder, using my parka for a mattress.

Before I fell asleep, my head pounding and my gut rolling, I remember thinking that maybe that crazy C.O. in Foymount was right about this boozing after all.

A couple of days later I saw Charlie at breakfast in the mess hall. Bruce, Frog, Stretch and I were just bummin' around trying to find something to do. I went over and sat with her, and the other guys made stupid noises at me and rolled their eyes.

Charlie seemed to be in pretty good spirits as we sat and talked over coffee. I thought about asking her out to something, a dance or a show or whatever, but I was critically shy and I was certain she'd turn me down. She was older than me, probably twenty-one or so, and I pictured her still carrying the torch for her poor lost Bill. I felt a kind of kinship to Charlie. This was an unusual reaction to a beautiful woman that I had never experienced before, being your average eighteen-year-old hormone with feet. She was a friend, just that. But Lord, was she easy to look at, kinship or not. I couldn't figure it out.

Charlie told me she had finally had a letter from her mother with all the news from back home. They had had a good harvest and her dad had bought a new Massey-Ferguson, and her mom wanted to know if there was any chance she could make it home for Christmas.

"Does that mean your Dad's coming around maybe?"

"Maybe. At least he lets her write me."

I changed the subject. "Anything happening, y'know, up the hill?"

"Nothing much. He hasn't been bothering *ME* at least. I was put up in Ident anyway, so I don't have to look at him."

Stretch and the guys were leaving.

"So look, maybe I'll see you in the radio station or something soon, okay?" I got up to go.

"Okay. Maybe we can go to a show or something." She had beat me to the punch.

"Yeah sure, okay. If our shifts don't conflict, sure."

She gave me a smile, waved 'bye and to me it sort of felt like one of the guys had asked me out. Sort of.

I caught up to the guys and as we left the mess it was decided we would go to the rec centre and shoot a few baskets; maybe scare up enough guys to have a pickup game or something.

We stopped in the barracks to pick up our running shoes and hiked up the road, passing the Station Warrant Officer in front of the Admin building. He got about six steps past us and hollered at us to stop. He told us, without pausing to take a breath: "If youse guys are heading up to the rec centre you best get your shaggy asses in the barber shop, eh? Because if I catch yer shaggy asses again needing a haircut eh, youse'll be working Orderly Corporal till the freakin' cows come home, eh?"

Having made his point rather succinctly, he turned and walked away.

We assured him that would be our first stop and went directly to the rec centre, waving merrily to the base barber as we passed.

Pritchard and Boots were in the snack bar, no doubt reviewing Pritch's newly-adjusted attitude concerning protocol expected at formal occasions. He had some horror stories about those sadists who ran Val Cartier all right, but it hadn't changed him.

He loved to hear people tell the story of the games-room opening. He hadn't the foggiest clue what went on at the mess dinner of course, but said it made those fourteen days in Val Cartier seem worthwhile.

After a while we convinced Pritch and Boots that a little pick-up basketball was a good idea, and a tableful of airwomen including Rosie wanted in, so we were away to the races.

There were the usual yuks at the start about playing shirts and skins, and then we ran our butts off for about an hour playing co-ed, with mixed teams.

The airwomen were no pushovers when it came to rough basketball. I went in for a" layup once and tried to go around Rosie. I ended up on my ass and Rosie had the ball and was headed the other way. She had a helluva hip-check, Rosie.

Pritch went up for a rebound once, and came down with his sweat pants knee-high, mooning, with big Wally and the twins on the flip-side. I'd never thought of hanging on to someone's waistband, but Frankie had and she proved it worked just fine. That incident put a halt to the game for five minutes or so while we hooted and rolled around, and the airwomen wouldn't let up on Pritch.

"Sure you shouldn't be living in OUR barracks, Pritchy?"

"Pritch, what's wrong? It's not that cold in here!"

"Happy to see me Pritch, or is that a Chiclet in your sweatpants?"

Finally, exhausted, we quit and staggered into the snack-bar for cherry cokes and fries.

I lost the toss for the jukebox and fired up Fats, Buddy and Elvis.

Rosie wanted to hear "I Fall to Pieces" by Patsy Clan. That's how she said it. Clan.

Sounds like 01' Ed's back in the saddle agin, pod'ner. Well, we sat around and shot the shit for a few minutes and somebody played "Hula Love" by Buddy Knox.

Scatch's face, after being transported briefly to the isle of coconuts, lit up like a scope.

Both basketball teams headed for the space behind our barracks.

We had to scrounge a snow shovel from some civvie employee in the construction engineering section to shovel four feet of snow off the area of the lawn where we'd buried the coconuts weeks before. Then when Pritchard was fairly sure he'd located the right spot, in line with a telephone pole, we found the ground to be so frozen we couldn't get a spade into it even if we had one, so they sent me back with the snowshovel, to trade it for a pick.

I wondered how I'd explain to the civvie why I needed a pick, and finally decided to tell him the truth. He laughed and said it was bullshit anyway, but I got the pick. We sweated and groaned for an hour taking turns bashing the frozen ground with the pick, Pritch all the time yelling at us not go too deep or we'd cream one of the coconuts, which he assured us would be filled with beautiful, high-potency rum fit for the Queen herself.

We uncovered one, then two, and the airwomen ran back to their barracks for a spoon which they then used to gently dig around the buried treasures. It was delicate work.

As each was removed from its little frozen grave, Pritch would run it into the barracks and place it on the radiator in his room.

Of the twenty buried, we recovered fifteen in a whole condition. The rest kind of collapsed upon removal. Two had holes blown right through the electrical tape that wrapped them, and they were covered in a frozen sticky substance.

Pritch broke a little piece off one of them and put it

in his mouth. "JEESUS KEERIST! THAT'S THE STUFF!-" shouted Pritch and we cheered. The women went down to the club and we put the coconuts in Scatch's duffle bag and met them down there.

There was a Coke machine in the snakepit and we fired in about twenty dimes for as many Cokes.

As we unwrapped the coconuts, particularly when we got to the area where the tape secured the lids we'd sawn off, hissing noises would emanate from the coconut lid, much like the sound of a freshly opened can of coffee.

Pritch had the honour of trying the first one. He found a beer glass and tilted the coconut into it. Nothing came out. He shook it over the glass. Nothing. He held it up and looked up into it, and said something was moving very slowly down, "like molasses in January."

He scooped some out with a spoon.

It looked like frozen molasses, but it wasn't frozen anymore and it sure as hell wasn't molasses. It stuck to the spoon even when Pritch held the spoon inverted. He gooped it off the spoon with his finger into the glass and licked his finger. His face reddened as the overproof coconut rum burned its way down.

Pritch tried to whoop but just mouthed it. Ten hands went for the spoon.

It wouldn't mix with the coke, but just sat in the bottom of the glass, a lump of rum toffee.

Frankie went to the mess hall to scrounge some spoons and it was discovered after many reddened faces, that a small lick on the spoon followed by a slug of Coke did the trick nicely.

Don't get me wrong...it tasted wonderful; coconutty and rummy but Lord Liftin' Jehosephat, was it powerful.

We had arrived in the club about three o'clock. By four, when the bartender arrived to open up, he had twelve pissed rummies to contend with, some with a brown gooey substance on their faces and clothes. The jukebox was blasting away at full tilt, and people were dancing amid broken coconut shells. The tables were covered in chunks of coconut and when they raised one airwoman's head up from the table, shell pieces were stuck to her face, held there by the insidious brown goo, Pritch's coconut rum.

Most of us got sick, at least three of us flamed out in the washrooms, and Frog and Bruce were put on charge.

To accomplish this, they managed to stagger to the barracks and go to room nineteen, get undressed, get between the sheets and fall into a coma so deep they could not be awakened for hours. They had the right room, wrong barracks. The Airwomen's Barracks.

# Hairy

Frog and Bruce spent their Christmas leave confined to base for 30 days. They had been rudely awakened with quantities of snow dumped down their pants by two meatheads. They were then ordered to get dressed and were escorted from the room, to loud applause from airwomen poking out of doorways down the long hallway in a colourful array of housecoats, all buttoned to the neck.

Pritchard awoke again on the pool table from a flame-out undisturbed this time by the Commanding Officer.

I somehow slept the entire night, fully dressed, kneeling on the floor with my head and upper body on Frog's lower bunk.

Coconut day plus one was a very, very quiet day for most of the participants.

The Station Warrant Officer again caught Bruce and Frog and I walking very lightly and pale-faced to the snack bar in midafternoon, took note of our lack of response to his haircut suggestion of the day before and escorted us to the barbershop. "Who do you think youse are, eh? Hairy dummies? Eh?"

Bruce shook so badly in the chair the barber wouldn't give him the razor trim. Frog had to get out of the chair and run into the can. It occurred to me that the barber might be having a problem distinguishing our faces from the sheet he'd tied much too tightly around our pasty necks.

The barber, who hailed from Roberval, just down the road, seemed unsympathetic to our plight when he said: "I tink you hasshole deserve to fill lak dat, drinkin' dat shit I hear 'bout. I hope you 'onk your toenail."

He perhaps, was representing the ill-feeling felt by the rest of the good citizens of Roberval towards the airmen of Mont Apica on this day. It seems that a carload of coconutheads, having driven to Roberval on the night previous to take in the bright lights, took pity on the cold twelve-foot-high statue of St. Jean ,the town's patron saint and centrepiece.

The citizenry awoke to find the magnificent statue, his arms raised in supplication, quietly gazing out over the frozen waters of Lac St. Jean, wearing an R.C.A.F. greatcoat and wedgie hat.

We had to report back to the Station Warrant Officer with our new hair and he took that opportunity to reprimand us in a loud voice yet again for being disobedient long-haired inebriates or, more succinctly, as he put it, "SLOPPY DRUNK SCREW-UPS!" No doubt about it he had a command of the language. And high blood pressure.

This was also when we, along with the rest of the people in adjoining offices learned why the barber, "WHO YOUSE ASSHOLES SHOULDA BINTO YESTERDAY EH!", seemed to have a bad attitude. "THE LOCALS EH? PISSED OFF AT US EH? A FRIGGIN' GREATCOAT ANNA WEDGIE ONNA SAINT STATCHOO FER CHRIST'S SAKE EH? THE C.O. WANTS SOMBODIES ASS EH?"

The next person, said the red-faced Flight Sergeant, to go to supply for a greatcoat and hat better have "SOME KINDA STORY I'LL TELLYA EH!"

Frog and Bruce also learned that mistaking the

airwomen's barracks for the airmen's is not recommended. He informed them both they were on charge and would be brought up in front of the old man ASAP.

"WHAT POOR AIRWOMAN WANTSTA COME INTA THE JESUS ROOM WITH YOUSE DRUNKEN ASSHOLES IN THE BEDS? EH?

As well, the regulations concerning home brew in the R.C.A.F. were made very clear. "IF I FIND OUT WHO THE ASSHOLE IS WHAT THOUGHT THIS COCONUT THING UP, EH, I'LL HAVE HIS BALLS FER BOOKENDS! EH?"

We nodded agreement that there are better ways to support books.

He gave me three extra Orderly Corporal duties for the hair. I was so sick I was hoping for the death penalty.

### Stars

December 18, 1958.

The winter nights in northern Quebec can be astonishingly beautiful. It's a dry, crisp sort of cold that made our flight boots squeak in the snow when we walked, the hair in our noses freeze and gave us little pains down in our windpipes if we inhaled too quickly.

The stars seemed to be closer and the sky was filled with them, especially if you got away from the glare of the base streetlights and the lights from the buildings. The aurora borealis with its fiery ribbons of green and orange had me losing my teenager's cool indifference and I stood in awe of its brilliance and beauty.

It was a Monday, my eighteenth birthday, and we stood behind the rec centre, Charlie and I, looking up at the stars and the flickering northern lights.

I'd wanted to get out of doing the show on Radio M.A.R.S. to go down to the club and get pissed, but Charlie heard about me trying to scrounge a replacement and made a point of reminding me that I'd promised the listeners a "Christmas Barracks Blast" show the week previous. They listened to me a lot, she said, and I shouldn't disappoint them. Charlie also said she wanted me to celebrate my eighteenth a day early. If I did, she'd buy me a beer or two on the night before as an birthday present. So she did and was even able to scrounge a cake from the mess hall and had everyone sing "Happy Early Birthday" to me.

So two beers felt like a lot more and sure enough, the next day; I didn't feel like going to the club on my real birthday. Must have been the cake.

It felt a whole lot better being on the radio. Besides, my voice was always deeper after being washed in beer and cigarettes....and cake.

Charlie had come down to the radio station do some record filecards, and prepare for her next show. I was "Rockin' Around the Christ-mas Tree" and playing with the "Chipmunk Song" on the Barracks Blast Christmas Show, fulfilling my promise to the listeners and making Charlie smile into her file boxes once in a while.

I came across this news item and stuck it in between the records. It mentioned that President Eisenhower had become the first person to have his voice rebroadcast from outer space from a satellite. The report said some people had reported spotting the satellite at night, and it could be seen over the parts of North America with clear skies. Maybe I'll go out and have a look, I said on the air. I'd never seen a president's voice. Yuk Yuk.

I went into "Jingle Bell Rock" and some guy with a slightly familiar voice called to ask me to announce that, never mind the satellite, the northern lights were in full bloom and folks should get out and have a look. And could he talk to Charlie?

So I handed her the phone, played "Blue Christmas", signed off with the usual "...and now Radio 1240 M.A.R.S. located at R.C.A.F. Mont Apica Quebec ceases

its broadcast day ", rolled "God Save The Queen" and "Oh Canada" and "High Flight" while Charlie talked quietly into the phone. She shook her head a lot.

I sorted out die records and refiled them and we locked up and bundled up in our parkas to go outside to look at the sky works. We stood in the cold and silence outside in the snow behind the Rec Centre under the green, yellow and purple-red curtains of ribbons with their starry backdrop.

"What a magnificent Aurora Borealis!"

"A roaring what?" she said.

"Aurora Bore. Eee. Alis. Fancy name for the northern lights."

"I like fancy names. Charlie's kinda plain, don't you think? Aurora Bor. Eee. Alis. Got it." Suddenly it occurred to me who owned the voice on the. phone.

"Charlie, was it my imagination, or was that the dreaded Corporal Barber on the phone?"

She didn't answer right away, but kept her eyes on the lovely night sky. "I wish it was your imagination", she said finally. "Yes, it was."

I stared at her, alarmed, as she looked up, her glasses reflecting the colours above. I didn't know what to say. It had sounded like a much too-friendly conversation to me to have come from Barber. I let it go.

We oooo'd and ahhhh'd at the sky for a while and then I couldn't wait any longer.

"It's none of my business, but I thought you and Barber hated each other." A long sigh from Charlie. "Ohhhh shit." Her head came down from the stargazing and she looked at me, a resigned expression on her face.

"Okay, I'll tell you what happened. They put him in identification. Remember I told you they'd sent me to ident? Well, I went up the hill on dayshift about two weeks ago and guess who's in charge of ident? Right."

She paused, leaning against the building. "One day he asked me if he could talk to me, y'know, about something personal, did I mind? I said, yes, I did mind, after the way he'd treated me. I'd talk to him if it had something to do with ident and that's that,"

"Well good for you. I wouldn't trust tha ... "

She interrupted. "He said, 'well that's what I want to

say, how sorry I am that I treated you like that, and I was hoping that maybe we could bury the hatchet. 'That's what he said to me," she said.

"How did you answer that?" "I didn't. I just kept my mouth shut, but then two days later he asked me if I'd thought about it, and I said yes but I was finding it very hard to forgive him for what he'd done." Charlie looked up at the twisting curtain of light on its backdrop of diamonds above us.

After a minute or so she continued. "I dunno. He probably means it. He brings me coffee at work and he's trying to be nice, but I can't ....he was such a bastard to me, John."

"Nobody's going to argue with you there Charlie."

We started to walk towards our barracks, walking in silence down the tunnel of ten-foot high snowbanks on both sides of the road. We walked looking up at the sky, our boots squeaking in the powdery snow, our breath seeming to crystallize in the frozen midnight air. Ahead of us, the smoke from the messhall kitchen went straight up like an arrow pointing to the three white radomes shining in the starlight on top of Mont Apica.

"I bet this would look great from the Ops building roof," she said. "Sometimes I go up there when I'm working. But on a midnight shift the stars seem so close."

I wanted to know more about the Barber story, but I decided it was best if she told it at her own speed.

The bus bringing the evening shift down the hill thundered past us with frosted windows hiding its occupants, its frozen tires bouncing them along.

I almost finished saying something about them getting off in time to see the neat sky when she said, "He wanted to know if I'd meet him at the...hey! Look!" She was pointing.

"A shooting star! See that? Look! Just to the right of

the radomes. See? Oh. It's gone. It was beautiful! God! What a sky! Did you see it?"

I looked down at her face and grinned. "You been hangin' around Stretch lately?" We both laughed.

"No really! It was a real shooting star, John, honest! Now shut up for a sec! I gotta make a wish." Her mouth was a firm line as she shut her eyes tight for a second.

When she opened them she said, "I suppose Barber can change. Maybe he's realized the, uh, how do they say that...the error of his ways?"

"Not too likely," I said.

She smiled, brightening. "Maybe. He's not insulting me anymore, but that doesn't mean I'm going to let him buy me a beer".

We reached the barracks.

"I won't let it bother me, that's for sure," she said. Then, "It's sure not going to spoil my Christmas. Hey! I forgot to tell you, John! I'm going home for Christmas leave!"

"Is that right?"

"God I'm goofy! It just slipped my mind! My dad sent me the airfare! My dad! Can you believe it? I'm takin' the bus to Montreal to catch a Trans-Canada plane to Calgary day after tomorrow!" She clapped her mitts together.

"Well, that is just great, Charlie!"

"I can't wait!" She was beaming at the thought of a Christmas with her parents, at last. A reconciliation. Some weight off her shoulders.

I mentioned that I'd be spending Christmas at home too. I turned to go. "If I don't see you before you leave, have a real Merry Christmas, O.K.?"

She grabbed me and hugged me.

"Merry Christmas to you too, John. "You're a good friend. And thanks for the great..." She pointed up. " Whatyacallit? Uhhhh.."

"Aurora Borealis!" we said together.

Then she ran towards the barracks door, laughing.

"Hey! I'll miss you!" she shouted.

I got very warm somewhere inside my shirt.

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I hitched a ride home to Sherbrooke with Roger for Christmas leave. It was a six day leave for either Christmas or New Years and they tried to give everyone what they wanted. Ops went to a skeleton staff for the duration. Another great secret we must have somehow kept from the mad Russkies. God help us if the Godless Commies had attacked over the Christmas holiday season. We could defend the Dominion drunk, but it was tough to do on leave.

Christmas at home was great.

Roger and I sang to the radio once again going down the highway south through Quebec city, and continued through Thetford Mines, Marbleton and East Angus, past the gently rolling snowy hills of the Eastern Townships, the coloured lights in villages and farmhouse windows twinkling at us.

"JINGLE BELL TAM IS A SWELL TAM! TO GO ROCKIN' IN A ONE- 'ORSE SLED!" sang Roger. He told me about his large family's Christmas with the French-Canadian fiddles playing jigs and the tortiere and midnight mass.

"We 'ave a 'elluva tam wit my family, tabarnoosh! On Christmas Eve, we hexchange gif, an' dance an' sing and den we all go to mass an' dat Fodder Martel 'e know our face, eh? So if we don' show hat mass...heyyy...the sheet 'it de fat."

I told him things were a little quieter around the

Reverend's manse, but we still had a good time with all the family around the piano and Mom playing for the carol sing. I still had a kid sister young enough to get some neat toy-type presents for, so that made it great too. All three of die brothers would be home on leave, and my older sister and her family would come up from the States. We'd all be together again.

"God bless us everyone," I said to Roger as he pulled the car into the driveway on Portland Avenue.

"Dat go for me too. Joyeux Noel, Jean!" We shook hands and he drove away.

It was good to see the old gang, too. I put on the ol' dress blues to impress everybody and the guys bought me a pewter beer mug and we went to Goodson's house and sang every song the Kingston Trio ever thought of and had a great time.

McNeil and Dunsmore and I even sang in the choir at the Candlelight Service on Christmas eve, provoking dark looks from our fellow chorister 01' Man Beedle, the high school French and algebra teacher, who could bean an errant student with a giant red algebra textbook from across the room, no sweat.

McNeil quietly slipped us some gum, and Beedle stopped turning to glare at the sources of the Molson fumes.

I met an old high school girlfriend at a party after the service and she invited me home.

We exchanged an unforgettable gift by the light from the tree very early on that Christmas day while her mother and father lay snug in their beds. The magic of Christmas had suddenly taken on a new dimension.

Christmas day we all went to church again, me wearing the dress blues. Presents were opened and admired and Dad sat smoking Matinees and drinking tea and beaming at his happy family. At dinner, around the big oak table, we all stuffed ourselves with the huge turkey Dad had been given by a farmer in the congregation. Mom's dark fruitcake, mincemeat pie and plum puddings disappeared, and Dad turned on Bishop Sheen, to catch his Christmas show.

I did spend a lot of time with the family, but not enough to keep me from looking back with guilt that I didn't spend more. It would be awhile before most of us were all in one house together again.

My high school friends and I also knew these reunions would be a thing of the past sooner than we could imagine, but we couldn't speak those words.

It was the best of Christmases.

Back at the base on Christmas day the youngest enlisted man was always given the job of honourary C.O., and presided over the Christmas all-ranks dinner that was served by the officers.

More than a few personnel who lived on opposite sides of the country could not go and spend any length of time home for either Christmas or New Year's six-day leaves, and they just hung around the base; a lonely bunch. So, the married folks in quarters took it upon themselves to make sure these airwomen and airmen had a home to visit and some company.

There were a lot of crying drunks, and short tempers and the Orderlies' Officer, Sergeant, and Corporal, along with the meatheads, looked the other way more often than not during the holiday season.

Roger and I drove back up a couple of days after Christmas. It was a fairly subdued ride without the singing and high Christmas spirits that accompanied us south, but we were feeling a certain mellowness from the time spent at home, and the trip went faster than I thought it would. Roger's mother had knit him a toque for Christmas, and he wore it all the way back in the car. The roads were in good shape for us, and we pulled through the gate around supper time and went right to the mess hall for some chow. Roger was working his first shift at midnight, so he went back to the shack to hit the pit for a while. It had been a long drive.

"I fill lak de rats of God," he said.

Bruce and Frog were down in the Airmen's Club so I ran back to barracks to drop my stuff off and went over for a beer.

Frog and Bruce (right room, wrong barracks) were on base for the holidays and had worked Christmas, so they were definitely in a sort of forced party mood and ready to start New year's leave the next day, by definitely not leaving. They could leave on December 30th when the thirty-day confined-to-base sentence was complete, but they had to return on January 3rd.

They talked earlier about going to the Saguenay Hotel in Chicoutimi for New Year's Eve, if Frog's car would start. It hadn't since the cold set in back in September, although rumour had it that it was the vehicle that had transported the greatcoat and wedgie that adorned the frozen cement saint in Roberval. It was parked off-base down by the ballfield and Frog had told the world that the key was stuck in the ignition. Besides, the guardhouse kept track of cars through the gate, particularly cars filled with drunks. The C.O. was still hunting for the culprits.

Frog sat at a table surrounded by empty Dow bottles and an overflowing ashtray, and croaked "H-h-have a c-c-cool yule Pete! S'get drunk an' BE SOMEBODY!"

He got up with a big effort and lurched to the jukebox. Soon my friends the Kingston Trio were doing "Tom Dooley" for the six millionth time in two weeks.

"P-P-PO B-BOOY YOUR B-BOUN' TO D-DIE!" wailed Frog.

Bruce had been told by somebody from the Orderly

Room at the bar that he had been transferred to Lac St. Denis, effective January 30th. The message hadn't made it up the hill yet, or Wilmot was on Christmas leave and all the messages were on hold.

Bruce was feeling pretty good, in spite of his confinement problem. From what we could gather, St. Denis was a paradise smack in the middle of the Laurentian summer/winter resort areas, with its own private lake and ski-hill. It was an hour and a half from Montreal and probably the best transfer a Fighter Cop could hope for besides the 3 Wing site in Metz, France. If you skied, it was wonderful. If you didn't ski it was wonderful. You simply borrowed a roof-rack and skis and dressed for the sport (or wore the snappy blues) and let the Montreal ladies mob you.

In the summer the action switched to lake resorts, where the bikini-clad babes from Montreal fell over each other to get to the pigeons from the nearby base. At least that's what they said. Another hellhole for Canada's fighting scope-dopes in the raging cold war.

"Our t-t-trooo love was t-t-trooooooo..." sang Frog, the "Platters" smoke getting in his eyes, and our ears.

We got all the Laurentian travel guide stuff from a guy from radar maintenance at the bar who had been stationed at Lac St. Denis. Bruce started to pick his brain. I went back to Frog to tell him about my Christmas, and after thinking about it, wisely decided not to, simply to maintain high morale, and my face.

From where I sat, three "SHIT HOTS!" from Bruce told me it was a pretty good transfer.

I was tired from the trip and told Frog and Bruce I'd catch them later. As I left the club for the barracks, I passed Ed Walsh and Rosie coming in. We stopped to talk.

Everyone assured everyone else that they'd had a

wonderful Christmas, and Rosie said Santa'd put something *REAL NICE* in her stocking, and winked at me, and looked at Ed and giggled.

"Doin' your show tonight, Ed?" I asked. It was "Down Home Country Night" on Radio M.A.R.S. once again.

"Come hell'er my water!" smiled big ol' Ed.

### Love is in the Air

I went back and flamed out for a couple of hours, got up about ten or so, unpacked and had a shower. They had just come out with nylon shirts, both summer and winter colours that they sold in the gift shop. They were freezing in the winter and hot in the summer, but never mind details, they were the latest thing; wash and wear. Just hang'em up to dry, and no more ironing cotton shirts.

I could only afford one of each, so I simply put on the shirt and showered in it.

I came back to the room with clean body and shirt and hung the shirt on my cupboard door, grabbed an old Playboy out of Frog's locker, climbed to my bunk, and fired up the Philco Transitone portable.

I managed to pull in WPTR and for a while dug ol' Boom-Boom Brannigan playing the hits from the Golden Studios down there in Albany. Amazing how you pull in the distant stations at night.

Here's the Teddy Bears and "To Know Him is to Love Him" and "It's Only Make Believe" with...who did he say? Conway Twitty? Jesus. The southerners must have a continual battle trying to give their babies strange names, I thought. What's the matter with BOB Twitty, if you're stuck with Twitty? And Ferlin Huskey? God.

Boom-Boom boomed away and I dug deep into the illustrations that went with the Playboy Philosophy. Bruce and Frog fell into the room, two-thirds of Larry, Moe and

Curly. Bruce had a beer and wouldn't give me any peace until I had a drink, and then Frog began yelling about the station on the radio and " W-W-HY CAN'T W-W -WE L-LISHEN TO EDWALL?"

That's how he said the name. Like Whitewall. Ed wall.

Okay I said, and dialed in mighty M.A.R.S.

Hank Snow was "Movin' On" again and Frog and Bruce lay down and provided backup. They made it sound like the big eighteen wheelers' wheels were coming off, rolling down the track.

By the time Hank had moved on, so had the consciousness of both my friends. I got down and took the dangling beer bottle out of Lennon's hand. Frog had some pretty good snores going already.

I looked back at the Playboy. The radio was playing behind my head. Ed was drawlin' something about the big "AW-RANKS DANCE ON NEW YARS EVE" and then he read the sign-off, finishing with: ".. have yerself a real fan nineteen fitty-nan."

I was going to turn it off, but then a couple of things in the Playboy distracted me again.

"Oh Canada" was playing and suddenly I noticed that someone was whistling with the music, terribly off key. At first I thought it was someone out in the hall, but then I realized it was coming from a tad farther away than that. The basement of the Rec Centre. It was on the air.

The anthem finished and in the two second pause between that and the beginning of "God Save The Queen", I swore I heard papers or something rustling. Then a bump, as if something had been set down on a table.

The radio had my attention now. Miss December was forgotten. The whistler was now accompanying the London Symphony Orchestra's version of "God Save the Queen". Halfway through, right around "happy and glorious, long to reign over us", a man's voice, somewhat muffled and in the background, said: "That's the shittiest whislin' ah've ever heerd in mah laff, huh huh."

It was Ed of course. He'd left his mike on. Oh shit.

I should go call him an .....

"Maybe you'd be interested in what I do best, Eddy," said a female voice in the background, very clearly and precisely timed to fit the interval between "The Queen" and "High Flight". The C.O.'s favourite poem was about to reach new heights.

A clunk as the tape recorder was started.

"Sounds fan t'me." Sproing! went the couch.

"Ohhhh .... " said Rosie.

"Oh...." said the tape. Sproing!

"....I have slipped the surly (zzzzip!) bonds of (oh! mmmm!) earth and (slurp, unhh!) danced (zzzzip..rustle) the skies on laughter (ahh ohhh...sproing!... Ed!) silvered wings." (mmmmm.mmmm.oh! sproing! MMMMMMM!)" Sunward I've..."

Now from down the hall: "JESUS CHRIST! LISTEN TO M.A.R.S.! SOMEBODIES HUMPIN' ON THE RADIO! NO SHIT! HAHAHA!" Oh God, I thought, someone should phone. Really. Somebody ought to. Not me. I turned it up.

"...climbed (oooooJeeeesus sproing! oh oh oh!..) and joined the tumbling mirth"... (sproing! sproing! sproing! oh! sproing! Ed! sproing! oh!)

I said, right out loud, not to the unconscious Bruce or Frog, but to fully convince myself: "THEY'RE PORKING ON THE COUCH FOR CHRISSAKE!"

"...of sun-split clouds-" (unh! sproing! unh! sproing! unh! sproing! unh! sproing! ooo?) "and done a hundred things you have not dreamed of...'(OOh Ed? sproing! ooooEd? sproing! oooEd? sproing! OOOOOOOOOH!) "...wheeled and soared and swung high.."

#### (OHJEEEEESUS! sproing! OOOOOOOH !)

Bruce's head came up off the pillow. "What the fu...?" "SHUDDUP! LISTEN!" I said, turning it up higher.

"...in the sunlit silence... (sproing! AHHHHHHH ! sproing! OHHHHHHH! sproing! OH!) ....hov'ringthere.. (GIVE IT sproing! TO ME! GIVE! sproing! IT! sproing! TO! sproing! ME! OH! sproing! GOD! OH! sproing AH!)

Bruce, blinking at me said "Who is..who th..are they sere.." "SHUDDUP!" I said, fascinated. Impressed.

"... I've chased the the shouting wind along ... (OH! BABY! sproing! OH! BABY! sproing! OH!) ... and flung my eager craft through...(OH JEEZ! sproing! OH! JEEZ! sproing!sproing! HOLEEE! sproing!) ...footless halls of air...Up...(AHHHsproing!AHHHsproing!) ...up, the... (Ohsproing!)...long... (OHsproing!)....delerious... (AHHHHsproing!) ...burning... (AHHHHHHH! K E E R I S T ! AHHHHHHHYAHHH!

sproing! sproing!...Ohhh..) ...blue, I've topped... (ojeez ojeez ohhhh sproing! ohhh spro-RING...)..the wind-swept heights with..."

RING.

("Eddy, don't answer it, stay ...") ...easy grace, where never lark, or even eagle..."

RING.

("Ah gotta...Oooops... s'cuse me " sproing.) I wondered if he left his boots on.

"...flew, and, while with silent lifting mind I've trod..."

("Uh hay-lo. M.A.R.S.. Cpl. Walsh.")

A pause.

("Ah...I....Pardon ME SIR? Yes Sir, Wing Comm... I KNOW you're the C.O., Sir, Ah. WHAT SIR?")

(" Eddy? Who IS that?")

"...the high untrespassed sanctity ..."

("AHM SORRY SIR AH HAID NO IDEA THAT...ohh sheee-it!")

"...of space, put out my hand, and t..."

Turned off the power switch to the control board is what Ed did tilen, thus ending the most memorable and legendary program in Armed Forces Broadcasting. Come hell'er my water.

I guess Rosie tried to get the hell out of the radio station but the meatheads were outside the door by that time. They both spent the night in the guardhouse, Rosie in the single cell and Ed sitting up very straight in a chair in the office.

They were both charged and brought up in front of the old man the next day. 01' Ed lost his ol' corporal hooks and got sixty days in the ol' hoosegow in Val Cartier.

Rosie was given her release. Dishonourable discharge. How's yer bird? Out. Civvy street. He returned after two months, somewhat of a legend. She went away in disgrace to find a job. Double - Standard Operational Procedures. We heard from someone later that Rosie had found a job waitressing in Quebec City to be close to Val Cartier to visit Ed until he told her to get lost. Nobody knew where she went then. She was too good for him anyway.

It was almost 1959.

## Who Wrote the Book of Love?

They hired some combo from Bagtown to play the all-ranks New Year's Eve thrash at the rec centre, a collection of bored older guys who hammered out big-band stuff like "In The Mood", and "Pennsylvania 6-5000". They all sat on a stage behind little cardboard music stands that said "Les Blues Note". I couldn't figure out whether they'd screwed up the English plural, the French plural, or they thought they were playing the blues. Behind them on the wall in giant cut-outs the digits 1 9 5 9 hung, festooned with balloons and streamers.

The bar was pumpin' out the sauce, and when "Les Blues Note", as Frog said, "tooks de break", they would fire up the jukebox (liberated from the snack-bar for just that purpose) and we'd jive our asses off for twenty minutes, get all sweaty, give the dance floor up to the Glen Miller Fan Club and hit the bar for a while.

Frog and Bruce and I sat at a table with some Airwomen and Roger and his friends from Crew Two, one petite-size called Mouse, and Frankie and Gladys from Crew One and some others, either off for New Year's leave or shift-lucky. I was one of those, pulling dayshift on both New Year's Eve and Day. Kind of good news and bad news.

I couldn't wait to see how lucky I felt the next morning.

I asked where Charlie was and someone said she was working the evening shift. At the mention of Charlie's

name, Mouse whispered something in Frankie's ear and they bothshook their heads in dismay.

What the hell does that mean?

"Wanna share your secret, Mouse?"

She just smiled at me.

It took us a few drinks before we decided to put on the Complimentary Hats and try out the Complimentary Noisemakers, but it happened eventually and I, fuelled by rye and coke, even got up and danced a couple of big band jobbies with Frankie, and a slow one with Gladys who had a couple of years on me but knew how to shine a mean buckle, if you get my drift. Midnight came with a countdown from "Les Blues Notes" fearless leader and troubadour, who did a fractured version of "Auld Acquaintance" while we all slobbered kisses on the poor airwomen who hadn't beat it in time somewhere so they wouldn't get slobbered on.

Gladys had the right idea though, and restricted her sloppy French-kissing to mostly one person. Me.

I waved my noisemaker and went back for seconds, and wondered if the basement of the Admin building was heated.

The radio station key now had to be signed out of the guardhouse, but that was out of the question anyway. It would feel too weird. The squeaky couch was probably still dented and I'd want to CUT the mike cord, just to be sure.

We sat close beside each other and played footsie and smoked a couple of cigarettes while I plotted a rendezvous.

I settled on the Admin building basement and asked the besotted Gladys if she'd, uh, like to go for a walk maybe?

"Where?"

I gulped my rye and said in a low voice that I knew

a place, where y'know we, uh, could like go, only if you'd like to of course, and...."

"WHAT?" She shouted over the music.

I spoke into her ear. "It's uh, well, okay, this place we could go to but it's not very well, uh, heated y'know what I mean. If you want to."

"WE COULD PUT OUR COATS OVER US, SILLY!" She hollered. Ten pairs of eyes swung toward us. We stood unsteadily to leave and as we headed for the coatcheck by the door, Frog caught up with me and said quietly, "-D-D -Don't take all n-nnight, okay? I th-think I g-g-got.."

"Hi John!" I looked up at the door.

It was Charlie, standing there in the dim smoky light from the hall under the red EXIT sign, in uniform, smiling at me.

"Happy New Year, John."

Something inside me skipped. I walked toward her, towing Gladys.

"God, look who's back! Happy New Year, Charlie!"

As we came closer, I noticed a bandage over her right eye.

"How was...holy geez! What happened to you?" I asked, pointing.

"Long story. I'll tell you later." Then, brightening: "How about a little kiss on New Year's Eve? It's 1959!"

I hesitated a second but then we kissed awkwardly, our eyeglasses clattering a little together. Her kiss was delicate. Tenderly sensuous. Extraordinary.

When we separated, we looked into each other eyes for a quick moment of...what? Of promise? A flash of something beyond friendship?

Probably the booze, I thought.

"So let's go have a drink. You don't really need one but you can tell me about your Christmas."

"Well, Charlie..." I started, glancing at the weaving Gladys. "Sorry, Charlene sweetie! You'll have to find your own! We were just leavin'," bleated Gladys, loudly.

Charlie swung around to see Gladys standing behind her. She blushed and looked down, fiddling with her gloves.

I said; "I'm sorry, Charlie, I was just going to walk ... "

"Thats alright. I didn't know you were ... uh ... "

She looked up at me, her eyes.. .were they glistening?

"I'll see you around."

With that she walked away, towards the crowded bar.

"Maybe we can have a coff..." I started to say after her but it was lost in the noise.

Corporal Barber waved to her from the bar.

Charlie hesitated, and then she went over to stand beside him at the bar, looking around as he said something close to her ear.

Gladys tugged on my coat-sleeve. "C'mon, whaddya waitin' for?"

I caught Charlie's eye, just for a second.

Expressionless, she looked away from me quickly, at Barber.

Gladys and I went out into the first morning of '59. \*\*\*

The weather was freezing and my morale was too. I was broke from pissing away a load of money over the holidays and particularly during a memorable weekend in Chicoutimi.

I had only seen Charlie a couple of times, and she seemed very cool to me. Not obviously pissed-off, but stand-offish, I guess. I sat next to her once in the mess hall and tried to make small talk, hopefully to lead to something bigger, but she had to go somewhere, she said, and left, her meal half-eaten.

I couldn't figure it out. Did she have a "crush" on me? It seemed to begin New Year's eve when she came into the dance. Maybe that's it. Why would she have a crush on me? On the other hand, why not? How was I supposed to know? What is it with women?

I had noticed that she now had a small scar over her right eye.

And to make matters even more confusing, if not disturbing, she and Barber were now dating, going to shows and cozily sitting together in the club.

The rec centre people made a half-assed effort at organizing a base winter carnival, but it was mainly snowshoe racing and dumb softball games in the snow that generated some so-so parties in the Airmen's Mess. They cancelled the downhill skiing when the competitors tired out climbing the tow-less hill.

Frog and Stretch and I were trying to keep it just a threesome now in the room, telling newcomers the fourth body was just away on leave. McLennon had gone to Lac St. Denis at the end of January after a thrash in the club that seemed to go on for days.

One night I was down in the laundry room with Stretch washing some stuff when Barber rolled in, pissed. The acne sores now had a florid background.

"How th' fuck are youse assholes anyways?"

Stretch had another one of his snappy comebacks.

"It takes one to know one. Seen any deer lately, Barber? Heh, heh."

I said nothing. I had given some thought in the past to the chance that perhaps he'd changed for the better; for Charlie. Wrong. He was the same despicable ignoramus he always was when she wasn't around. He put on the nice-guy show for Charlie's benefit and everyone on base knew. Except Charlie. I hated him for it and he knew it. He knew that Charlie and I were friends, and he suspected that we were once something more.

I glanced at him and said nothing.

Barber, ashes falling from the butt hanging from his mouth, threw his bag of laundry down on top of my pile of clean, folded clothes.

"Dear? You wouldn't believe the dear I just seen, airman. Yeah." He put his face close to mine. He reeked of stale beer and cigarettes. I wanted to punch him out. What would I get for hitting a junior NCO? Not worth it to do time for this grubby excuse for a human.

"S'matter Johnyboy, cat gotcher fuckin' tongue?"

I picked his bag off my stuff and dropped it on the floor. "Piss off Barber." I grabbed my stuff and headed for the door. "Hey asshole!" he yelled after me.

I wanted to keep walking, but instead turned, ready to say something else. He held his cupped hands in front of his leering face, raising them up and down.

"Charlie has got such lovely jugs, Johnnyboy." He thrust his pelvis toward me. "I jus' love ta..." I lost it. I don't remember much of what happened. Stretch told me later that at that point all the colour drained from my face and my nose went pure white. He said when I went after Barber I was berserk and screaming like a maniac. He said Barber took one look at me and ran behind a washer, crouched down, holding his laundry bag in front of his face. Stretch said I caught him square in the balls with my foot. That's what I wish I remembered. Stretch grabbed me and got me out of there. Barber lurched out into the hallway holding his crotch and yelling something about putting me on charge, but nothing came of it.

"He ain't that friggin' dumb, John," said Stretch. "You got a witness. You think he wants the old man to

know what he said about Charlie?" I knew I had to talk to her real soon.

## The Skids

The endless wait for the Russian guests continued at 24 Aircraft Control and Warning Squadron. McLennon was always on the forward-tell line from "Crystal", the call-sign for Lac St. Denis, telling us stories about this resort of his down south. That didn't do much for my morale either.

One midnight shift someone called up to radar report to tell me that McLennon's on the Crystal line and wanted to talk to me. As it turned out, he wanted to tell me that THEIR winter carnival featured downhill skiing on their own private ski hill. THEN how about a little curling, in THEIR private club?

Afterwards, he said, they all go down the highway to a place called "Roberto's Lodge" and drink beer till the sun comes up. And you could run a tab, for Chrissake!

McLennon also made a point of telling me he can't wait for summer when he'd get to waterski on the base lake behind the base motorboat.

I told him in a very base way to go forth and multiply and I hoped the base meatheads locked him in the base crowbar hotel.

I hadn't seen Charlie down at Radio M.A.R.S. for a long time. When I asked the dim Flight Sergeant Williams, he said she told him she wasn't interested in the radio station anymore. He said they had found a married woman who was interested in filling in for Charlie both on the air and to do some record filing once in a while.

"She's too busy with that shithead Barber," was the flight sergeant's assessment. Well said, flight. Much too busy.

What the hell is wrong with her? I worried and puzzled about her. She'd been distant ever since I waltzed out that door with the soon-to-be nauseous Gladys. Gladys, whose first barf of 1959 was left in the admin building basement thirty seconds after we arrived. Not a good start for meaningful foreplay. For that I'd left Charlie behind in the rec centre.

I ended up feeling not bad up the hill New Year's Day after all. Thanks and no thanks, Gladys. It suddenly struck me that Charlie urgently wanted to talk to me about something at the New Year's Eve dance. But I was leaving, I said so, and she couldn't respond with Gladys hanging on to me. Maybe that was it. Roger-Dodger. Maybe it had something to do with the bandage over her eye. Christ, I don't know. They can carry a grudge.

Maybe, for some, the grudge is too big a load to carry much longer.

I was still boppin' out the hits once a week on Radio M.A.R.S., playing disk-jockey and filling in here and there when people were away.

According to the Orderly Room wire copy I read on the newscasts those weeks, some bearded jerk named Fidel had taken over Cuba, Pearson and Dief were going at each other in Ottawa, the R.C.A.F. was going to get this great new fighter, the Arrow, and some guy in California stayed underwater 13 minutes, 42 seconds. I said on the air I had cousins back in Newfoundland that had been underwater for *YEARS*, but not on purpose. I got trouble from the base Newfies for that.

One grey February morning, after having just come off midnight shift up the hill, I grabbed a couple hours

sleep and found myself dozily filling in for someone.

Jean and Georgette had just finished doing another gripping "Homemakers' Hour", so the universe was unfolding as it should, stain free, and with some great fondue recipes.

I'd picked some music and was sitting on the couch glancing over the old news copy when I heard a knock on the studio door. I got up with a squeak and opened it.

It was Charlie. Her dark hair and the shoulders of her jacket were covered in snow.

"Hi John." She brushed her hair with her mittened hand. Her glasses had fogged over and she held them in her other mittened hand. She has such beautiful blue eyes, I thought again.

"I was just in the orderly room. Did you hear the news?" "What news?"

"Buddy Holly, the Big Bopper and Richie Valens killed in an airplane crash." She handed me some wire copy. "Here it is. I thought you might want to know...just in case you wanted to play their music on the air, or something."

"How did...Jesus...they're dead?" I was stunned. Buddy Holly?

"In the States someplace...in a small aircraft." She turned as if to go.

"Hold it, Charlie! Can't you come in for a minute?" She paused and looked at me doubtfully, then shrugged and came in.

"God. I don't believe it. When did this happen?"

She took off her coat and shook the snow from it and hung it up on the door. "God it's snowing like hell. Last night."

"Did you say Richie Valens too? The "Oh Donna" guy?"

She sat down. "Him and the Big Bopper and Buddy Holly... they're all gone."

"Oh my God. We're going to have to do something on the air, don't you think Charlie?"

She looked up at me with a sad smile.

"What do you mean 'we', white man? Well, I 'spose I can pull the file cards and get the records together if you want, John. But I don't...uh...come here anymore, y'know."

"You don't have to do that Charlie," I said. "I can do it."

"What the hell. I hung my coat up. Might as well hang around if you need me. How've you been anyway? Long time no see."

The "Rawhide" CBC transcription tape was just about done and I had to read the news and get "Midday Melodies" on the air.

"I've been okay, mainly," I said over my shoulder as I walked over to the control console.

"I gets to feelin' low every now and then, but no sweat. I'm copasetic. Thanks for bringing me the news copy, though. I'd forgotten to go to the Orderly room. I'm half asleep. I came off a graveyard shift." The tape was ending. "Stand by one, Charlie."

She turned to the file cabinet and began sorting through file cards and I moved around behind the console and readied to go on air as I faded the "Rawhides" theme down.

I read the news and mentioned after the plane crash item that Radio M.A.R.S. would be having a special feature later in the day, time to be announced.

I got the first record on the air.

Rosemary Clooney belted out "This 01' House".

"So how was everything at your ol' house, anyways Charlie? Did you have a good Christmas? I never had a chance to ask."

She walked toward the console with a handful of 45's and some file cards. "It was alright," she said, her eyes downcast.

"Did you get in an accident or something? I remember you had a bandage over your eye on New Y..."

"The scar's fading. I had some stitches," she said, frowning. "So did you fall down, or what?"

"Kinda. Never mind. Here's the records." She handed me the records.

"Thanks Charlie. So, are you going to tell me how you hurt yourself or..."

"Well. Not really. I wanted to tell you New Year's Eve."

She paused for a second, looking down, at her hands. "But you seemed to be in a hurry."

She looked up at me. She had put her glasses back on. The black-rimmed glasses now framed angry eyes.

"Well I..." I started, as she turned to walk away. She stopped. "Y'know, maybe you might have spared me ten minutes? All I wanted was someone to talk to for Chrissake!"

Her eyes were filling, and colour was rising in her cheeks. "Jesus, Charlie I'm sorry. I...."

"That's the story of my life..." and she took her glasses off and walked away, towards her coat, wiping her face with the back of her hand. Oh shit. Not again, I thought. She grabbed her coat.

"Don't go! Stand by one, Charlie, please! The record's over. Wait just a minute, Okay? Okay?"

She nodded and stood with her back to me, holding her coat in one hand.

Out of Clooney and intro Vic Damone. I shut off the mike.

She sat down with her coat over her lap, dabbing at her eyes with a Kleenex.

"Oh shit, I'm sorry. I'm acting like a spoiled brat, John, but I sure wanted to talk to you when I got back from out west. I...well, thought about you and, oh God John, it was awful..." She put her face in her hands.

Holy Jesus, this is serious, I thought. What do I do?

"What do you mean?" I said. "What the hell happened?" "Well my...my father and..."

1 could hear on the monitor that the record was almost finished. Damn.

"Hang on a sec Charlie. Sorry. I gotta find some time for us here." She shook her head in frustration and dabbed at her eyes. I found a Harry Belafonte Live at Carnegie Hall LP cut that looked like it was ten minutes long.

"Here, this is longer. I'm sorry. Jesus you're really feelin' low, eh?. Hold it one sec and you can tell me, okay?"

Off "The Street Where You Live" and on to the "Island in the Sun."

I got up from behind the console and went over to sit in the chair beside the couch.

"He'll sing for ten minutes. So, tell me what's goin' on." She looked up at me, her eyes red, a tear on her cheek.

"I'm sorry. I'm really a mess." She blew her nose.

"No you're not. Tell me what happened."

"Well, to make a long story short, my...my father got drunk the night before I flew back. He never hardly drank before. But since Bill and I, and the accident and me leaving and all, well, my mother says he's really been going at it. Then, when I got home..."

She paused and used the Kleenex some more. "He told me that I had hurt my mother by leaving..." her voice started to choke and rise, "...and I had no right to do that especially over some dead fucking Indian...and..." She put her hand over her eyes.

"It's okay Charlie," I said, weakly.

"No it's not, John. The bastard." She took a deep shuddery breath and composed herself. She sat up straight and fooled with the tissue, her hands in her lap.

"Okay. My mother told him to be quiet and stop picking on me. He told her to shut her mouth or he'd shut it for her. She said he shouldn't talk that way to her and he hit her across the face...knocked her down on the kitchen floor, ohhhh..." She sobbed into the Kleenex again. I didn't know where to look. Her heart was breaking.

"I went over to stop him, because he was kicking her and...and he...p..punched me in the eye."

She looked up at me. "It wasn't the first time."

"I wanted to call the RCMP but my mother wouldn't let me. She didn't want the neighbours talking again. He knocked out one of her teeth and split her lips."

"Boy, talk about a terrible Christmas leave," I said, wishing the second it was out I'd said something else. I tried again. "I wish you'd told me sooner, Charlie. I had no idea that night that you felt so...ummm..."

"Shitty? Well, I really did y'know. And sometimes you think you only have one friend in the world and I saw you and...oh well...I'm sorry I've been acting like a snot to you, John. It wasn't your fault."

"That's okay." I wanted to hug her.

"I just thought you didn't give a shit." "But," she went on, looking down again, "Hank has been nice to me, and he says he thinks he understands why my Dad acted that way."

Hank thinks he understands? *HANK*? "Is that Barber's first name? Hank?"

She nodded.

Hank Barber. Out of the frying pan, Charlie and into... "What does that pr...he understand?" I asked, incredulous and getting hot. "What's to understand about a guy that beats up his wife and daughter for Chrissake!"

I lost it for a second and started to apologize. That's the last thing she needed now. "Look Charlie, I'm sorry, I shouldn't..."

"I know you don't like him much, John, and not many do, but he's really nice to me. He's shown me that he's got a good side. He's just shy, and he tries to cover it, y'know by acting tough, but really he is not the guy I thought he was. Really."

Oh God. Do I go ahead with the bulletin about dear Hank, or simply smile and nod and hope it goes away? Jesus. Just to hear her say that degenerate's name makes me go off the deep end.

Piss on it. Here goes. Okay. Cool it and be nice, John. "Well Charlie, I'm so sorry about your trouble at home. The man needs help."

She nodded, shrugging.

I went on: "I'm really glad you came down here today. We're buddies, right? I thought for a while there that you were really pissed off at me for some reason. I'm sorry about the thing that happened New Year's Eve, Charlie. But I got to tell you something. Promise you won't get mad?" She just looked at me.

I took a deep breath. "I happen to think that Barber's pulling a snow job on you, Charlie. He acts differently when you're around. He's the same guy as he always was. It's like he's trying to suck you in or something! He is a...a...first rate prick, Charlie, and everyone knows..." "Don't you talk about him like that!" She was hissing, colour rising to her cheeks. "He's been nice to me when I didn't have anyone to talk to; when you were too busy shagging Gladys McRea to even take two minutes to listen to what..." She stood up and headed for the door, "...was bothering ME!"

I stood up. "I didn't shag...Jesus Christ Charlie! He AGREES with your old man! He hates women for Chrissake! He made you feel like crap for the first six months you were here!"

She had her hand on the doorknob, glaring at me.

"Lookit Charlie. He's talking about you behind your back! The filthiest damn..."

She slammed the door so hard I thought she had bounced the pickup arm right off the turntable.

Oh Lord. That wasn't supposed to happen. No sir.

When I finally went over and turned the monitor up Belafonte was still singing, "...come back Liza, come back girl, wipe de tear from me eye."

Just what I needed.

She'll come to her senses, I thought. She's smarter than that. God, I felt like a dummy. I should never have opened my big goddam mouth. Maybe what I said had sunk in. Maybe she'll ask the dork what he's been saying. Probably not. Love is deaf as well as blind, I was sure of that.

The applause faded for Harry. "That was Harry Belafonte live in Carnegie Hall on Radio M.A.R.S.. The weatherman says the high for today is only 10 and it's going down to about minus 30 tonight and with the wind chill that's about 50 below. Bundle up, troops, it's getting chilly."

I saw Charlie just a few times during the next six

weeks or so. She was usually with Barber. At the show, or down in the Airman's Club, in the snack bar. Once, during an exercise, I passed her in the hall in front of ident. I said "Hi", but she just kept her head down and kept walking.

The snow had mostly gone now; just patches of it lay in shaded gullies near die tops of the mountains. The temperature got up to sixty-five one day and we took some blankets and beers out behind the barracks to soak up the sun. It felt good after the long winter, if only for just a couple of hours before the sun went behind Mont Apica and the chilliness returned.

Those transfer bells were breaking up that ol' gang o' mine. Stretch was now at R.C.A.F. Station Moisie, Quebec. Moisie made Mont Apica look positively Floridian. It was near Sept Isles, on the Gaspe Peninsula. Stretch was not thrilled. Matter of fact he got drunk the day he heard about it and stayed pretty well pissed until he left, including during a week-long leave he took in Montreal where he ran into an old high school friend when he was visiting some buddies he had at the base at St. Hubert.

This guy was now a jet-jockey, flying CF-IOO's and he offered Stretch a flip, for God's sake. Stretch said if we ever had the chance to get a ride, don't make the same mistake he did and go out and get pissed the night before. I guess his old buddy passed Stretch off as an officer so he could get him into the mess the night before the ride.

"Nice place," said Stretch. "These people get pissed PO-LITE-LY."

The next morning bright and early after a big breakfast in the Officers' mess, Stretch's pal put him through the mill in the Cf-100, doing loops and spins and every trick in the book. Stretch said he managed to hold down his brekkie until they landed and were taxiing to the stop.

As the ground crew sergeant was putting the ladder up to the side of the aircraft, Stretch had the technicolour yawn into his helmet. When the canopy was back, he gingerly handed the full hard-hat to the sergeant.

"Oh MY Sir!" said the sergeant, peering into the steaming hardhat. " Well! These things happen, Sir! I'll take care of it Sir!"

Said Stretch, "Rank, lads, has it's friggin' privileges. An' if anyone tells you different,-tell 'im he's fulla shit."

T'was ever thus.

Frog and I had acquired a couple of new roommates, reluctantly, after enjoying the roominess of just the two of us in the room for awhile. Andy Fuller and Vic Summers were assigned to Crew Three, so they took Bruce and Stretch's pits. Fuller had come in from Metz, France, so he had a million stories to tell. Mostly about France, French women, parties, airwomen, French women, parties and women of other nationalities. Vic had come in from Falconbridge, a base near Sudbury, where, he said, he'd met women of other nationalities also.

"Ya, like from the moon", Frog said once, having enjoyed the Sudbury Nickle Company's lunarscape before.

Frog was overdue for a transfer and I should have one any day also, so we both waited for Wilmot to call.

Spring had a foothold now, and we'd be down at the ballfield hitting some pop flies out every now and then when it wasn't raining. If it was, we hit the club's beer machine in the snake pit until the bar opened. By now, LAC Hunter was quite the boozer, complete with the complimentary morning after shakes and sweats. So why be different? That's what you did, period. The nerds didn't, and we outnumbered them twenty to one.

So you drank after evening shifts, day shifts, and on your days off. If you didn't have the money, you

borrowed a fin from a buddy. Beer was a quarter, liquor was thirty-five cents. Smokes were thirty-five cents a deck. The Queen gave me around ninety bucks a week, after pension and rations and quarter's allowance was knocked off. I was fat and happy.

To drink before a graveyard shift was to invite disaster, but on Friday beer-call, when ten-cent beer went on sale, you could do a dollar's worth and flame out back at the barracks until the bus left at eleven-thirty. Hungover at midnight; how many can claim that? Let's get drunk and be somebody! Jesus, it was easy. Too easy.

Some of us grew up and survived. But, just barely.

## Asleep in the Valley

It was a clear afternoon in early April, and Frog and I had hit the pits after a midnight shift. The explosion rattled the barracks' windows.

"Wha-wha-what the hell wassat?" asked Frog, and we both jumped out of the bunk beds and ran to the windows and yanked up the shades.

Everybody was coming out onto the street from the airwomen's barracks and the Admin building; even a couple of cooks in their whites ran out of the Mess and stood looking north, their hands shading their eyes.

The Admin building blocked our view from our window so we pulled on some fatigues and ran outside.

A large, black pillar of smoke was rising out of the woods way past the ballfield, maybe a mile or two on the other side of a low mountain. The siren had started now and the firetruck roared down the road, passed the rec centre and out the gate.

"What the hell is that?" I asked one of the cooks; a guy from Cornerbrook, Newfoundland.

"Somebody said it's a plane went down, den! One of de b'ys from Bagtown!"

We looked at him like he was crazy.

"You're shittin' me! A CF-100? Who says?" "Dem airwomen says they saw it go down, go as' them if you don't believe me, b'y. D'ere over dere wit' de ol' man, den!"

Frog said something about going in to get his

binoculars. I jogged over to the group of airwomen, two of whom were crying on each other's shoulders. The C.O. was running like hell for the Admin building. Frankie was there with her arm around one of the ones crying. It was Gladys.

"Jesus what happened Frankie?" I asked.

"Joanie and Gladys were lying out behind the barracks, and this CF comes by real low from up behind the radomes and all of a sudden.it crashed over there! Gladys says she thinks the engines quit, 'cause just before it crashed she said it went really quiet. Joanie says it was so low she could see the crew. She says it had only one wheel down."

"Did they eject, Gladys?' I asked. She shrugged. "It was too far away to see, I..." She went to Frankie's shoulder.

Through Frog's binoculars we saw the firetruck was as close as it could get, just sitting at the end of an old logging road that ran past the ballfield. We could see guys with fire extinguishers heading into the woods.

Good luck to them. The mountain top had to be at least an hour's walk through bush that thick, and God knows how far down the other side of the mountain.

The Station Warrant Officer came into the barracks hollering over and over again: "I want everybody in this barracks over to the firehall in ten minutes! Wear fatigues and boots and a long sleeve shirt, eh!" Final instructions before leaving: "Get your arse in gear, eh!" There were ten of us or so, and they gave some of us machetes and took us down to the end of the logging road. The C.O. told us to stay together until we reached the other side of the mountain. Then we would fan out into a search pattern.

The firefighters had given it a shot, but there wasn't any way they could do it in rubber boots and carrying

50-pound extinguishers through the dense forest. They were leaning against the truck, sweating, looking frustrated.

The Station Warrant Officer, the Flight Sergeant, was with us as well as the Old Man, who had simply taken off his jacket and tie and found a pair of boots somewhere to replace the oxfords. He had a two-way radio on his belt.

The Flight Sergeant handed out flashlights with belt-clips with "S.A.R." printed on them. Search and Rescue.

We started into the bush; single file, ten or twelve of us all separated by about five feet. Two guys with machetes headed up the procession and they hacked away at the undergrowth and the small evergreens, but it didn't make a hell of a lot of difference. We were covered with scratches from pine boughs before we made a hundred yards.

But we hacked and slithered in the mud and fell through the deadfall paced by the C.O. now, who had moved up front with his own machete and was in a big hurry. Maybe once he waited for this parade, I thought. Nobody had the foresight to bring a couple of canteens of water, but at least blackfly season had not yet begun so things could have been worse.

I slipped through some deadfall and twisted my ankle, but there was to be no stopping, so I limped along for a while.

"I ha-ha-hate to think wh-what's waitin' for us," whispered Frog as we slogged on. "I th-th-think maybe these guys could wait a long time wi-wi-without b-b-bein' any worse off, eh?"

We walked and scrabbled and climbed up that mountain, where not one clear solid path or step followed another, probably walking where nobody had before. Sometimes moss as soft and thick as a green mattress

would be underfoot, then that would give way to rock crisscrossed with fallen timber. Our separation from each other grew.

After about forty-five minutes the C.O. should down the mountainside to take it easy for a couple of minutes.

I was about eighth in the line, and it sounded like he was way the hell up there. I could hear him shout to the Flight Sergeant to keep us tighter.

Scratched, covered in dirt and sweat, we sat where we were, panting hard. I lay on some moss and looked at the patches of blue sky showing through the tops of the spruce and jackpine.

They picked a beauty day to buy the farm, I thought. How old were they? They died up here not half an hour ago, on this beautiful day. This is going to be horrible. It burned. THEY burned, probably. They waited for spring just like the rest of us. They drank beer and smoked cigarettes and chased women just like us. Poor bastards. Burned. I don't want to have anything to do with that cockpit.

And don't let me act like a chickenshit in front of the C.O. and the other guys. Please. Jesus, that's selfish, I thought, but oh, please.

Now, our heartbeats still well up there, the Flight Sergeant hollered for us to bring the line tighter together and we got up and closed ranks. "C'mon lads! We're gettin' there!" shouted the Old Man from up there somewhere.

The sun was getting low, behind the trees on our left.

"He hustles, for an old fart," gasped Fuller, or somebody behind me.

They'll be short a couple of bodies tonight on evening shift, I thought, with Andy and Vic up here too. They were on the splithalf of Crew three, working evenings. Both were just thinking about getting ready to

go to work when the Flight Sergeant made his entrance. I hope this lasts long enough to get me off the graveyard shift. No way I want to go up the hill after this death-march. Lousy choice of words. That's what it is though, really, isn't it? Oh God.

Near the top of the mountain, which was about twelve hundred feet high, was an outcropping of rock which had to be avoided. There were small patches of snow here and there, in the shaded areas. When we crested, the bush was still so dense there was no clean line of sight down the other side. We just suddenly came up on level ground, said a silent prayer of thanks, and kept knockin' through the trees until we were headed downhill.

It was really steep in sections and we had to hang on to the trees as we stumbled down. We came upon a small creek flowing from a spring and Frog and I drank and splashed our faces. The facial and hand scratches stung in the cold water, but it tasted good. I was out of breath and I could hear my heart in my ears. "Every beer I ever drank is coming out my pores," I wheezed to Frog as I bent to drink from the little creek.

The other four or five guys went by us as we drank. "Cuuuuuuu'mon you guys for chrissake it's gettin' dark," said somebody who stopped and scooped some water up to his mouth, and then moved on.

Sergeant Delay. If nobody answers, it's him.

I had no idea he was behind me. I guess he doesn't say much until he has to.

The light was really fading now, a kind of grey half-light. I wiped the sweat and dirt from my glasses and on pressed.

Things I just couldn't see were smacking me in the face so I took to walking with my arms crossed in front of my nose. I was last in line now. Frog was in front of me and I could hear the C.O's voice from way the hell down

the slope, echoing through the valley.

"HERE IT IS...IS..is! OVER! over HERE! here here." Jesus they found it, I thought.

Hey Frog!" I shouted. "Did they find..whoaaaaeeeeyshit!" I stumbled on something and went ass over tea kettle and then slid down a steep rock slope on my back, stopping when I grabbed a small spruce tree. As I lay back on the rockface for a second, something bounced off my shoulder and came to rest against a tree six feet down the slope from me. My back and my hands stung. I eased my way down.

"Y-y-you o-okay?" shouted Frog, from somewhere below.

"Yup. Wait up Frog," I said, gettin up. I moved closer to the thing to see what the hell it was.

I unclipped the flashlight from my belt. I turned it on and no go, so I thumped it twice against my leg. It came on and I pointed it at the foot of the tree. My mouth went dry, and my heart came to a halt.

It was a man's boot. It was covered in blood.

"HOLY SHIT! HEY! HEY!" I screamed.

"Hey! hey!" echoed the valley.

It's really true isn't it? Your hair can actually stand on end. I shone the light on my boots to make sure it wasn't one of mine.

I stared at it for a few seconds more, squinting in the dark, and then slid down to it, curious and full of dread.

"WH...WHA...S'MATTER?" yelled Frog from below.

## I nudged it with my foot. "IT'S...A...BOOT! I FOUND A GODDAM BOOT! WITH BLOOD ON IT! A BOOT!"

Leaves and dirt were stuck to the blood on the boot's high ankle support. The toe gleamed blackly and the laces were torn down the middle almost to the bottom. It lay in a small patch of snow that had a red smear from its edge to where the boot lay.

I stared at it for a couple of seconds. I could hear movement; leaves and twigs crunching underfoot; coming toward me from below.

"A BOO-BOO-BOOT FER CHRISSAKES?" bellowed Frog, scrambling up closer to me.

Chattering, yelling, echoing voices came to us from way down below. It was almost dark now.

Where had it come from? It had hit my shoulder, sort of rolling down that little 15-foot cliff behind me. I pointed the flashlight up, and the beam swept into the jackpine and spruce and tamarack around me. They swayed slightly in a fresh, gusty breeze.

No, I thought. It couldn't have been above this spot. It must have been up behind the rockface that I had fallen down.

The flashlight's beam fell on the base of a pretty good-sized jackpine that clung stubbornly to the moss and rock at the top of the outcropping. One of the tree's roots stuck up out of the moss and dirt, then snaked its way into a wide crack in the top of the rock.

For a second I wondered if I had tripped on that. No, it was the boot. It had to be.

I heard a chopper in the distance, mixed with shouts down farther.

I traced the rough jackpine trunk upward with the flashlight beam. Into the circle of light first came a dark sock. I held the beam there and watched as a drip came off and hit a leaf below with a small spatter. I moved it up to the leg of the blue flight-suit.

It was one of them, hanging, strung up in the tree.

I'm sure I screamed at it. It was an IT at this point, like a shadowy glimpse of something in a dark basement. My heart was beating like a trip hammer and I held my

breath. I swept the light up, the edge of its yellow beam spotlighting a small bird nearby that fluttered away squawking and chittering.

The lines and canopy of the parachute were caught and tangled in the tops of two or three jackpines, dangling him up there. His helmeted head hung down, appearing to look at a leg that hung over a branch at the knee. The other leg was bootless, soaked in blood and canted at an impossible angle, turned inward, the toes almost facing backward. One arm hung by his side, the other above his head tangled in the cords at the wrist. He wore black gloves.

He looked a bit like Dorothy's scarecrow from Oz, all angles and looseness. I wish now that I could have simply clicked my heels three times and gone home.

The parachute canopy rested in the trees above him, like a protective tent. Or a shroud.

I caught my breath after a first squeaky attempt to yell and finally got it out. I bellowed at the top of my lungs: "HERE'S ONE OF THEM! HEY! HEY! HERE'S ONE GUY!"

I couldn't take my eyes off him. Frog materialized beside me. Then three more scrambled up to stand beside us; Andy, Vic and Sergeant Delay.

We stared up into the trees for a few seconds at the fallen pilot swinging slightly in the glare from our flashlights. We were all wheezing and talking at once, but in low, respectful funereal tones now.

"Ho-ho-ho holy shit," gasped Frog. "Izzy dead 'er wh-what?"

"Oh Jesus. I don't know. We gotta get him down," I said.

I felt dizzy for a second or two. I looked down with my eyes shut and it passed. Please God.

The chopper sounded closer now; the whump-whump

of the big blades echoing off the hilltops. It was almost dark. "WHAT..what...HAVE...have..." asked a distant voice from below, suddenly getting lost in the helicopter's chop.

"W-W-W-W-WE FOUND ONE OF THE AIRCREW HANGIN" IN THE TREES!" Sergeant Delay shouted down, but there was no chance they could hear him now.

"Jesus Christ! He ejected!" said Andy, snapping us out of our momentary shock. "Let's get up there and see if the poor bastard's alive 'er what!"

"Oh, oh C-C-Christ.." said Frog. "I-I-d-don't think

I..."

I'm not the only one, I thought.

"How the hell are you gonna..." I started, but he began to clamber up the rockface and we followed him.

"Gimme a boost you guys!" Andy said and we cupped our hands and he was boosted up to stand on my shoulders. From there he shimmied the tree closest to the one that seemed to be this guy's main support.

"Careful Andy! Don't touch that main tree he's on! He could tear loose and fall," warned Vic, huffing beside me.

Andy climbed steadily, occasionally stepping on the branches of another nearby pine to push himself higher.

We kept our beams on both Andy and the aircrew guy. Chunks of bark and small branches fell on us as Andy inched higher.

He reached the flyer's blood-soaked leg, got up a little higher on the pine and grabbed a handful of the guy's flight suit at the waist.

"WHAT'S GOIN..." I'd started to shout, still looking up, more than a little panicky. "I mean, what's goin' on down below?" "The 01' man found some clipped off pinetrees. Him

and the Flight Sergeant found the CF, I figure," said Vic. "Did you guys see the aircraft?"

"Nope," said Vic. "We heard you yellin' up here before we got down to it."

"Oh shit!" said Andy. Then, louder: "GIMME SOME LIGHT ON THE OTHER TREE EH! I GOTTA FIND SOMETHING TO STEP ON!"

I swung my beam over and shouted upwards. "HOW'S THAT?"

"Okay! Okay! I'M ALMOST UP!"

"I figure we'll be findin' another one soon," said Vic. "He's gotta be in here somewhere. They should both bang out at roughly the same time when they eject in a CF-100, right? CAREFUL ANDY!"

Andy cursed again. A branch clattered down beside us.

"NO SWEAT! I'M BREAKIN' THEM OFF MYSELF!" Andy said. He was up at the same level with the guy now. We could hear the chopper coming up the valley.

Andy put his hand up under the flyer's collar, going for a pulse. We couldn't hear him, but his mouth moved with: "Hey buddy, hey buddy, hey..."

He slowly raised the visor, and leaning as close as he could get, peered inside. He put his hand in, under the nose.

The chopper noise was really getting loud.

"SON OF A BITCH!" said Andy. "HE'S BREATHIN'! HE'S BREATHIN'! HE'S GOTTA PULSE AN' HE'S BREATHIN!" A small cheer went up.

"NOW YOU GUYS WATCH OUT FOR THIS TREE! STAY THE FUCK AWAY FROM IT!" yelled Andy. "SOMEONE GO DOWN AND GET THE S.W.O. OR THE OL' MAN!"

Frog, halfway up the rockface, slid back down and

hit the ground running. He needed to be away from here, and I didn't blame him. But be careful of what you might find down there Frog, I thought. We could see the trees rattling nearby as the big chopper lumbered up towards us. Probably can see our lights, I thought.

"GODDAM CHOPPER'S GONNA SHAKE US OUTA HERE! COUPLA YOU GUYS GET UP IN THE TREES BESIDE MINE 'AN HIS!" Andy screamed over the noise.

I handed my flashlight to Sergeant Delay and scrambled up one closest to Andy's tree as best I could. I was able to get high enough so I could reach up and grab Andy if he slipped. Vic got up higher, but his tree was about a foot farther away and he couldn't quite reach the pilot. He finally gripped some parachute cord with one hand and wrapped it around his tree.

The chopper was almost overhead, its down-wash bending the tops of the trees nearby like daisies in a stiff breeze. A searchlight swept by from above lighting the four of us for a brief second.

The trees were whipping back and forth in the wind from above. The pilot swung out and back, the sleeves of his flight suit flapping a little.

"ANDY! GRAB SOME MORE CORDS! THE CORDS!" Vic screamed. "HE MIGHT GO!"

Andy reached above the guy's head and wrapped more of the looser nylon cords around his hand and the tree, clinging with his other arm.

I reached over and took a grip on Andy's belt.

The chopper was directly overhead now, zeroing in on the light from the flashlights that Sergeant Delay held on us. Its floodlights came on us again and the noise and down-wash were incredible. Andy and Vic and the aircrew guy and I swayed up in the jackpines, twenty feet up or so. The branches above us banged down on our heads, the sharp needles whipping. The parachute canopy, fitted over the pointed tree tops, now bulged inward, threatening to tear and drop this poor guy the final twenty feet of the worst flight he ever had.

The chopper's spotlight held on us.

We were screaming like hell for it to get the hell out of there. Not that it mattered; they couldn't have heard a train coming. Finally, someone up there twigged to what was happening and it backed off, but not much. The trees still shook and rattled in the wash. There was no way the chopper could see us under the canopy as we swayed, hugging the trees, our faces against the bark. The arm I had around the tree ached. A branch dug into my side.

Andy suddenly slipped down a foot and almost pulled my other arm out of its socket as I clung to his belt. He edged up again, as I pulled as much as 1 could on his belt.

"DON'T LET GO OF ME! IF THIS LETS GO I'M.,.!" yelled Andy.

Then, from the helicopter, someone on a bullhorn: "ATTENTION BELOW! IS HE ALIVE? FLASH IF HE'S ALIVE! They switched their searchlight off. Delay, holding his shirt up over his nose from all the dirt flying around, flashed two or three up at them.

The loud-hailer from above hollered over the beaters: "OKAY! OKAY! NOW LISTEN UP! CLEAR AS MUCH BRUSH AWAY FROM THE AREA AS YOU CAN! REPEAT: CLEAR THE AREA AS BEST YOU CAN! WE WILL BE LOWERING SOMEONE WITH A CABLE! FLASH IF YOU UNDERSTAND!"

Sergeant Delay, looking like one of the bad guys in a Hopalong movie, flashed.

The chopper barked down: "OKAY! WE'LL BE BACK AY-ESS-AY-PEE!" The whumpwhump faded down the mountain side.

"JESUS!" I shouted as I looked up, seeing one of

the trees finally poke through the nylon, "I THINK THE—!" The canopy was slowly ripping in about three spots, the topmost branches bending slowly and snapping up to disappear through the holes. "HANG ON ANDY!"

Andy said "HEY!" but held on as I let go of him and pulled and shimmied faster than I thought I could up above them to grab the slowly loosening and falling cords from above and wrap some of them around the trunk of my jackpine before the main supporting tree ripped through the fabric. I wound some around one hand as I breathlessly swayed, almost at the top of the tree, glimpsing the starry black sky through the torn silky canopy that was above me and around me. I felt the night breeze on my face. I looked down, surprised I was this high so quickly. All of us were quiet for a few moments as we waited.

A tearing sound now and the pilot's weight came free of the treetops. Branches and bark tore away at our arms and legs and faces as we slid down like stones hugging the jackpines, hanging on to him. We pulled on the cords and they bit into the moist bark and caught on small branches and slowed us jerkily, stopping once for a second and then, as we heaved a sigh of relief, falling another foot or so before catching on some sizeable branches.

We stopped him four feet from the ground. Our hands burned, our arms and legs and faces scraped from the trunk. We hung on. But everything is relative. We felt better than he did.

" YYYYYYOOOOOOU GUYS OKAY?" asked Sergeant Delay, reaching up.

"FIVE SQUARE!" yelled Vic. We carefully lowered the flier to Sergeant Delay who held him in his arms like a baby before laying him down on some soft mossy ground. This guy must have forty pounds on Sgt. Delay, I thought. Everyone's superman tonight.

"Now be careful, you guys. He could be all broken up. Not just his leg," cautioned Vic, as we clambered down. "Don't move him much."

It was the pilot; his wings gold against his flight suit. Sergeant Delay bent over him, and removed his hardhat and undid the 'chute's back-pack clasps on his chest.

He didn't look any older than me. His face was grey. Delay got a pulse and started to look at his leg. One foot was canted inward at a sickening angle. He probably lost a lot of blood, someone said. His pant leg was soaked.

"Aaaaaaaall we can do is make him comfortable. The Med-A in the chopper will be back soon," said the sergeant.

"IIIIIIH'm gonna put this chute over him, what's left of it." He started pulling it out of the trees.

We went down to the bottom of the rockface, retrieved our machetes and started to hack away at the smaller trees to make room for the drop. We cleared a little area and with some hard pushing to get the trees to fall away from us, we could see a fair patch of the starry sky above us now.

We hadn't even come close to noticing during the last hour of the adrenaline overdose how really cold it had become. Our shirts suddenly needed a coat over them. I started a fire going close to the pilot, downwind, and we sat around the fire and smoked, staring at him wrapped in his torn 'chute, watching his chest barely rise and fall. We could hear the chopper below and wisps of its loud hailer shouting to the other guys, but we couldn't make it out.

Vic asked, "Hey, by the way, John. How the hell did you get over here in the first place? We never came down this side. We were about a hunnert yards east, fer Gods sake; way over there." He pointed off into the bush.

"Damned if I know. Frog and I stopped for a drink outa some little creek and everyone walked by us. Frog

got ahead of me and I fell down that sonofabitch." I nodded at .the rockface.

"JJJust lucky I guess," said Sgt. Delay, nodding at the nylonshrouded pilot.

"LLLLLLLLucky for him."

"I wonder if they found the other guy. Maybe that's whats takin' so long," said Andy, moving closer to the fire. "God. I'm freezin' my ass off." We found more deadfall and were getting the fire hotter when we heard the chopper coming. We stamped out the fire and got the flashlights on and shone them up through the hole we cut, playing the beams on the torn pieces of the pilot's parachute still fluttering in the treetops. Down below, through the forest, tiny flashes of light approached.

The chopper, now overhead, cranked on the searchlight and as we squinted through the flying debris from the downdraft we began to see a guy on a winched cable coming down to us, spinning slowly. He spun down through the opening we had cut, carrying a duffle bag and a two-way radio. We helped the SAR guy down the last four feet or so of his drop. He ducked out from under the cable's padded harness and said something into his radio. The cable was winched back. The helicopter moved away.

Leaves and debris still flew around from the downwash, as we all turned our backs and covered our eyes, now that we had free hands.

"IS HE BREATHING?" he yelled, bending over the pilot.

"YEAH BUT JUST BARELY!" I screamed back. He took a pulse and opened his lids and stared into the guy's eyes, then he pulled the chute apart, undid the flight suit and listened to his chest.

He zipped the bag open and pulled a syringe out and stuck it right through the pilot's flying suit into his shoulder. He pulled some scissors out of the bag and cut the bloodied pant leg up from ankle to crotch. The bone stuck through the skin below the knee. There was a deep gash about a foot-long, up the inside of the thigh. He picked up the two-way and spoke into it, then bandaged the wound. The chopper moved back into its place above us.

"THE LITTER'S COMING DOWN! GRAB IT FOR ME!" he ordered, working quickly on the flier.

They lowered it and we guided it down, moving it over close to him. Wrapped in a bundle and tied to the litter was a bunch of red blankets; maybe twenty. The SAR guy swung around and grabbed the cable attached to the four guywires on the litter, unsnapped it, unwrapped the blankets and spoke again into the two-way. The cable rose and the chopper moved away a bit again. He took a leg splint out of the bag.

The trees still bent and whistled in the wind from above. Leaves and twigs flew everywhere.

He strapped on the splint to immobilize the leg and slid the litter over beside him. He moved us around either side and we all lifted slowly and gently placed the pilot on the steel-mesh stretcher where he was wrapped in a blanket and buckled in with four or five straps.

He spoke into the two-way and the chopper came back over us and dropped the cable. He hooked it on to the guy wires and the chopper began to throttle up. The cable tightened and we held the pilot steady as it slowly raised him off the ground. The high beams from the chopper bathed us all in bright light as we now steadied the cable and its human cargo as much as possible. Slowly he was winched up, straight up, not touching so much as a twig of the swaying jackpines until he finally reached the chopper's running-board where two guys hung out and brought him on board.

"YOU GUYS STAY WARM WITH THESE!"

shouted the Search and Rescue tech, pointing to the bundle of blankets on the ground. "IT MIGHT BE A LONG NIGHT!"

The cable came down and he slipped the padded harness over his head and under his arms.

"HEY!" I shouted into his ear. "WHAT ABOUT THE OTHER GUY?" DID THEY FIND HIM? THE NAV!"

He looked up and quickly around at our raggedy little group. He nodded and then held his hand up, thumb down.

"HE'S WITH THE AIRCRAFT! BOUGHT THE FARM!"

He keyed the two-way and said something into it. "SEE YA!" He rose and vanished into the bright light.

It clattered off into the night and we got another fire going and wrapped ourselves in red blankets, not saying much. Vic said I'd get the J. Fred Muggs award for fastest monkey.

"That's die farthest I've been off the ground since I joined the air force," I mumbled, lying down. My scrapes hurt and my shoulder and hand throbbed. I looked up through the swaying tree tops at the stars against the darkness. I have been there before, I thought. Another time, the dreamtime, I'd climbed another tree. Once before I had climbed up to reach out and grasp life as the wind washed over me.

Eventually, the C.O. and the Station Warrant Officer and four other guys including Frog, all looking grim-faced and exhausted, their breath clouding in the cold, staggered through the bush and into the circle of firelight. They grabbed blankets and sat with us around the fire.

"I wish we'd a thought to bring some jackets, eh?", said the Flight Sergeant.

"It would have been murder walking up with those

things, Flight," said the Old Man. "The blankets will do us."

I looked at Frog's face. It was white. He had run from up here all the way down to tell them the good news. It was the only good news, as it turned out. He had run smack into what he and I had feared the most...

"Was your fella in bad shape, lads?" asked the Old Man, squatting down with us, a blanket over his shoulders.

We told him what we had seen and what had happened, everyone chiming in with the details.

"Well, maybe he'll make it, at least. Good for you guys", said the Wing Commander.

"The other man didn't make it, sir?" asked Vic.

"No. He's with the aircraft, in the backseat, he, uh..."

The C.O. lowered his head for a few moments, his hand on his forehead. He finally took a deep breath, gathered himself and looked at us with sad, full eyes.

"He...didn't eject for one reason or another."

I looked at Frog. He sat staring into the fire, pale and stricken. He had dirt streaks on his face, like he'd been crying.

"Awwww shit", said Andy, after a pause. "What the hell happened, sir?"

The C.O. looked up.

"Well, there will be a board of inquiry, you can bet on that, but from the few words I got from the C Ops O before we left, it looks like these guys had landing gear stuck in the down position and flew by the tower for a visual confirmation. That much we know for sure. My guess is they stalled and flamed out and were too low for a re-start." He looked into the fire for a second, and continued.

"The aircraft exploded and burned on impact. It's a

helluva mess and a helluva waste. At least we got one back. Maybe. Who came across him anyway?"

I raised my hand. "I did sir."

"What's your name airman?"

"L.A.C. Hunter, sir."

"We must have walked right underneath the poor bugger and never saw him. How did you...?" "Actually sir, I was quite a bit behind the main group and got off the beaten path a bit and..."

"...Heeeeeeee found the guy's...the pilot's...boot, sir," said Delay.

"Well, it sort of hit me on the shoulder after I fell down that little cliff there," I said pointing. "I think I kinda tripped over it or maybe that big root that's sticking up at the top of it there, I dunno."

The C.O. looked at me, smiling, just a little.

"Well Hunter, your search and rescue technique is a little clumsy, but very effective. At least for him," he said jerking a thumb at the sky, "If he survives." He paused, poking the fire with a stick, gazing into it with a desolate look.

"I think, gentlemen, we would be wise to stay here for the rest of the night instead of breaking our legs trying to walk out in the dark. Everyone roger that?"

He looked around, and we nodded and rogered, sir.

"Right-o then, let's keep the fire going, and before I forget thanks for a hell of a good job. The SAR people from Bagotville are coming back in tomorrow morning for what's left of the other chap and the aircraft. I only wish we'd found two live bodies, but that's the way it goes. Now., who's got a beer?"

We laughed at that, and it helped. Then the Flight Sergeant said it was the officer's job to bring the beer and we laughed again and conversations sprang to life for a few minutes but then faded away quickly.

The C.O. and the Flight Sergeant sat on a log beside the fire, speaking in low murmurs. The rest of us piled leaves for beds and wrapping ourselves in red wool blankets lay down and thought of the guy in the backseat asleep in the valley. The fire crackled and the smoke drifted up past the tops of the trees.

I was surprised that I actually slept, really. I woke with a start and sat up. I'd had my falling nightmare again, the one where I fall and fall but never seem to hit the bottom; in this case sharp tree tops. I always woke in the nick of time. They say if you hit, you're dead.

Staring back at me from the other side of a blazing fire, wide-eyed and sitting in the same place were the C.O. and the Flight Sergeant. The C.O. had a tired smile.

"Don't be yellin' eh, son. You'll scare the shit out of everybody", said the Flight Sergeant, poking the fire.

"Sorry, Flight. Bad dream." I rubbed my eyes. "What time is it?"

"Oh we can start walkin' in about an hour, it should be gettin' light by then, eh? She's around six."

I went over stiffly and sat by the fire. My scrapes stung. I imagine Andy's and Vie's didn't feel much better.

"Did you...uh.. fellas get any sleep?" I asked, not knowing the proper collective term for addressing a Wing Commander and a Flight Sergeant at the same time.

"Oh, we tried I guess, didn't we Flight? I couldn't sleep", said the C.O. "I never was a camper-type."

After a while, as the sky went from black to a light gray, sleepy people stumbled to the fireside, stiff from lying on the cold leaves.

We kept our blankets over our shoulders and began the hike back to base. This should be a piece of cake , I thought, mostly downhill. And hunger helped quicken our steps. Frog, I realized, hadn't said a word since coming back to the top last night with the Old Man and the Flight Sergeant. Somebody had to really shake him hard to wake him earlier.

We'd been walking and scrambling down the mountainside over the deadfall and rocks for about an hour, so I waited for him on the trail and asked him, "How's it goin, Frog'?"

"I'm O-O-O.K." he said, walking with his head down.

"Was it bad down there, down where it...y'know...pranged, Frog?"

"W-w-well, I...." he started. Then a long pause. Then, "It w-was th-th-the worst friggin' thing I ever seen in my life, John. He-he-he was cooked like a black roast of b-b-beef. His helmet all m-m-melted and oh

I..."

He stopped for a minute, his hands on his knees, bent over. It passed, and we walked on for awhile. I didn't know what to say. I'm glad it was you and not me? Then Frog said, "So I ran into the woods and b-b-barfed my guts out. It was... I'll never forget the ss-s-stink either. Y'know what though? I slept like a baby last night. I guess I walked back up with the other guys but I don't r-r- rremember a Goddam thing except I woke up this morning and I musta s-slept like a rock. J-Jesus."

"Maybe you were in, y'know, shock or something, Frog", I said.

"Th-Th-th- worst friggin' thing I ever seen in my life."

I could see the road by the ballfield.

"The w-w-wings of the C-C-CF were the first thing you come across. Th-TH-TH fu-fu-fueselage made like a god-god-goddam bobsled right through the fuckin' woods, die whole kit'n'ka-ka-kaboodle on fire, about 200 fuckin' yards from the w-w-wings, n-n-no shit, John."

"Well, I just wanted to get away from that poor

bastard hung up in the trees, too, when I first saw him," I said.

"You beat me to it, Frog."

"T-t-tough shit on me."

After ten minutes we emerged from the bush and walked the road beside the ballfield up towards the highway. A four-by-four came down and picked up the C.O and the Flight Sergeant and a few other guys that were ahead of us up the road and took off up past the guardhouse. There were about four of us trudging along, Frog and I well back, bringing up the rear, hoping the truck would return for us.

The civvy Voyageur bus on its Chicoutimi to Roberval run came down the road and stopped on the shoulder across from the guardhouse. A woman in civilian clothes got off and walked very slowly across the road and stopped for a moment holding onto the fence beside the gate with her head down. A blue scarf covered her head and she was wearing a grey coat.

"What's the matter with her? She doesn't look so hot."

"I-I d-d-dunno" said Frog, peering into the distance and shading his eyes with a grimy hand. She walked slowly, almost painfully, toward the guardhouse, whoever it was.

The four-by-four came back down the road, stopping at the gate. She waved to the driver. He leaned out to hear what she was saying. He got out, helped her into the front seat, turned around and gunned down towards the barracks. "I-I-I m-might be wrong," said Frog. "But w-wasn't that Ch-Charlie?"

## **Transfers and Promotions**

My transfer came in, along with Frog's, both effective May 15, about three and a half weeks away. Frog drew R.C.A.F. Station Parent, in Quebec, another boonies location whose call sign was "Scooter". Nobody ever scooted to Parent.

I got Lac St. Denis and went nuts. I couldn't wait to get the word down to Bruce that I was on my way. R.C.A.F. Station Paradise!

"Y-Y-You're 1-luckier'n a dog with two p-p-peckers", said Frog.

But Frog didn't seem to mind his transfer to Parent too much, except for having to find a place to leave his car as Parent was accessible by train only. He knew some guys there though and word had it the C.O. was a pretty good head, so he seemed fairly content.

We found out the same day we wrote our trade board exams. This was a sort of proficiency test that had nothing to do with the real world of FighterCops, but much to do with getting a raise and later, if someone died, as we used to say, a promotion.

I hadn't studied and figured I'd be lucky to pass, but, still excited about the great transfer, I didn't care.

So, with these excellent reasons to celebrate we weren't surprised to find ourselves on this particular Friday sitting down in the Airmen's club. We were surrounded by new faces. Most of the old gang had been shipped out, by now.

The CF-100 accident was under investigation over in Bagotville and Frog had to go over about a week after it happened and give a statement about what he had seen. It was a formality, since they were pretty sure of the cause. They didn't call Vic or Andy or me because we hadn't actually seen the aircraft accident site.

The Old Man had been right. They had a flame-out at low level, and never had a hope in hell of pulling it up.

The C.O. informed everybody on the search team that special commendations would be put into our personal files, and on this Friday night right in the middle of beer call he came down to the club. He was halfway into the place before some bleary-eye twigged to who it was and screeched "ROOM!" Seventy-five woozy people rose to their feet, knocking over chairs and glasses.

"Relax ladies and gentlemen", he said, and we all gratefully flopped back in our chairs and he went to the bar and made some small talk with an airwoman named Lee. She was the only married airwoman on the base; a rarity.

Lee's husband Ken worked as an Intercept Controllers' Assistant. He checked me out on that job during some training we had back in March for the trade board exams. It led to me finally getting out of radar report and into the intercept control room; a much more exciting place. I found out Ken had been assisting the controller who was working the aircraft that went down.

Ken moved up beside Lee as she chatted to the old man, and then they left as he was distracted by someone else.

Vic, Andy, Frog and I had a hot game of euchre going when the Wingco came over and stood by our table, laughing like hell when Frog, my partner, trumped my ace.

"Look you guys. Don't let me interrupt this big game

here," he said, "but I thought maybe after die trade board exams I'd have a good chance of catching you together here.\*

"Trade board exams! I knew I forgot something today!" I said.

That got a laugh. I was amazed that it came out, really. High ranking officers close by triggered a tendency for me to pull my head in, turtle-like, until the danger passed. But all of us felt closer to the old man now.

"Well I'd better not forget this, lads. Flying Officer Ross, the pilot you found up the tree, well he wants me to say thank you to you all. He's on the mend and when his leg heals up, he'll be back flying."

We clapped and cheered and banged on the table and the old man stood us to a round of beer. We felt good. Too good to play cards, so the euchre game folded and we got into some serious ales.

Later, close to eleven it must have been, I got to chatting with Lee and Ken, who had come back. I knew it was around eleven because they were in uniform, down for a couple before working graveyards up the hill. They congratulated me on the jammy transfer.

Somehow, the conversation turned to Charlie. I hadn't seen her in a dog's age, and wondered how she was getting along. They were on the same crew and told me Charlie had been transferred. They thought it was Senneterre; a base just west of Mont Apica.

Senneterre. What a gawdawful place. That's ALL she needs, I thought.

I remembered seeing her with her bonehead boyfriend at the snack bar one night, sitting over in a comer apart from the crowd. The good thing as far as I was concerned was they looked like they didn't want to be there or anywhere with each other. I tried to catch her eye to see if I could get a hi or maybe even a smile out of her but she didn't look my way or didn't want to. It was a sad situation. That was a while ago.

"You heard that she was sick, eh?" asked Lee.

"No I didn't. Is she okay? Was it the flu or something?"

"She's okay now, I guess," said Lee, glancing at Ken. "She lost a lot of weight though. She said it was food poisoning." Lee paused and took a sip from her beer glass.

Ken glanced at his wife and picked it up where she left off. "She wouldn't go on sick call; just stayed in her room."

" Her room-mates said she was really weak. She almost got in trouble for not going on sick call but then suddenly she came back to work."

"Food poisoning? Here?"

"I don't know. She said Chicoot or some place she'd gone on days off. She came back and just stayed in bed."

I looked at Lee and she looked down at her beer, shrugging. Is that an embarrassed look on her face? I wondered.

I suddenly remembered Frog and I coming out of the woods that morning after the prang. " Oh yeah, I remember. Frog and I saw her gettin' off the civvy bus from Chicoot awhile back. At least we thought it was her. I didn't think it was."

"It was her," said Ken.

I grabbed another beer and a table came free so we sat down.

"Food poisoning, huh? That's weird."

"That's what she says," said Lee, looking away. I'm not sure whether I want to know if it was food poisoning or not, I thought. Something's poisoned her. We just sat in silence for a couple of minutes. The jukebox was cranked and a singalong broke out.

"Hey!" said Lee, brightening and looking at her husband. "Take ME to Chicoot for food poisoning, Kenny! Been a long time since I had a chance to eat out somewhere else beside the messhall!" She laughed and nudged Ken in the ribs.

"Don't you cook in your married quarters?" I asked.

"Sometimes. But meal tickets are pretty cheap, you know. Don't have to do the dishes, either," she laughed.

"Plus the fact that I can't boil toast!"

We talked for a while about their married life, and Lee told me how accommodating the air force had been. They'd been allowed to get on the same crew, and had been allocated married quarters. She asked me about the exam and I bounced a few of the tough questions off them, and got different answers than mine. That was a mistake. There goes that raise.

I offered more beer, but they refused. They said they wanted to go upstairs and grab a bite before the bus came. Ken looked through the smoke at the door.

"Charlie'd be a lot better if she told him to piss off', he said.

Barber came in, in uniform, and went to the end of the bar and ordered a beer. He was working midnights, too.

Maybe Charlie'll be coming down, I thought.

An airwoman got up and stood beside Barber. I think she worked in accounts.

"We'd all be better off without good 'ol Hanky Panky", said Lee. "You're some lucky you don't have to work with the jerk."

"He's got her on the string, too," said Ken looking over at Barber and friend. He glanced back at me.

"You're kinda like good buddies, with Charlie I mean, aren't you, John?"

"I was until I told her what I thought of that asshole," I said, nodding at Barber. He was nose to nose with his friend now.

"Well, I don't know Charlie that well," said Lee. "But lately she's been real quiet, y'know? I caught her cryin' in the ladies room up the hill one day before she... got sick, but she wouldn't tell me what was botherin' her. I should a figured it out." There's that little blush again, I noticed.

"She's still workin' with numb nuts there in Ident." Ken hooked his thumb towards Barber. "That's one thing that's bothering her!"

Then he said to me, "Did you know he was married before?"

"Say again?"

The jukebox was blasting away and it was getting noisy, but I'd heard it right.

"Before?" said Lee. "Still, for Chrissakes!"

"Say again? He was ..."

Ken leaned over and spoke close to me, his hand cupped around his mouth. "I said he was married. Claims he's divorced. But that's bullshit. Somebody just got transferred in from Gander says he has a wife and a kid there. How's that grab ya?"

Grab me? You could have knocked me over with a feather. My God. Poor Charlie. I looked over at Barber groping and cackling at the airwoman and felt a cold fury in me.

"Does Charlie know?"

"I don't think so," said Lee. "She'll find out sooner or later...hey are you pissed off, John? Relax."

"Yeah I am. I can't believe how cruel that stupid prick can be." I felt like walking over and dropping the guy where he stood. I looked away and it started to pass.

Ken slapped the table. "Jesus I just remembered!

He's transferred to St. Denis! Lucky you!"

They both laughed. I didn't.

Ken said, "Sorry, John. We're just happy to be rid of him." They said their goodbyes and went to the mess hall.

I sat for a while and drank beer and listened to my morale go into the tubes as I thought first about Charlie and then about screwing up a trade board exam and then perhaps having to look at Corporal From Hell on my new base. Then I thought some more about Charlie.

I remembered our winter walk under the northern lights, laughter at my bad jokes when we met and the tears when she told me about her terrible burden. The hug and the New Year's Eve kiss bearing the spark that seemed to quickly fade. Or did it? Her smile. "I'll miss you, John", she said once.

I looked over at the smarmy, grinning Barber who sucked her in and used her when she was so vulnerable. I thought back to my first night in this club, when she'd held the cloth to his bleeding head after he slapped her. I thought about his slimy remark to me in the barracks. I watched him walk out of the club with the accounts type, giggling, his arm around her, patting her ass.

A tight knot stitched my stomach. Somebody should do something about that son of a bitch.

I thought about the Old Man. He's a good head. He would listen. Shit yes, I thought through the haze of beer, and he'd do something.

I took another beer, chugged half, put it down on the end of the bar, lit a cigarette on the wrong end, threw it down, lit another.

Would I do this if I was sober, I asked myself.

Maybe, I decided. That's close enough for government work. I walked through the snake pit and down the hall to

the back door of the officers' mess, beer-brave.

I knocked on the bar door. The bartender, a corporal, opened it.

"May I talk to the Commanding Officer?" I said, enunciating a shade too perfectly.

He told me the C.O. had gone home and maybe I should get my drunk ass back to the Airmen's ASAP. Then he shut the door. I found Frog, Andy and Vic and told them the story. They told me I should mind my own goddamn business.

I said it was my business, she was my friend.

They said stay out of it, you'll end up in shit.

What did it matter anyway? I'm here if she needs me, I thought. I told her that once. She knows that. Right?

The next couple of weeks flew by. I phoned home and gave my folks the good news and promised to get home for a weekend, maybe on my way to my new posting. I started to pack some stuff a little early, and that amused the hell out of my roommates. "Nervous in the service that they'll cancel it before you get there?" said Vic.

I talked to Bruce on the lines every chance I got about Lac St. Denis. He told me some more wild stories. He said the Station Warrant Officer there was crazier than a shithouse rat. He actually drove around the base with this big dog he called Bullet in the front seat of his car as his wife sat in the back. He said they had a base dentist who wore glasses as thick as the bottom of a pop bottle. This guy, Bruce said, held the world record for wrong extractions. He pulled out the tooth NEXT to the bad one more often than not. His name, Bruce swore up and down, was Doctor Jekyll.

I told him to go jump his hat-badge. Who'd believe crap like that?

He told me to wait and see. He said he'd try to get me on his crew. They had a practice and it looked like they had a hell of a ball team, he said. I couldn't wait.

They didn't have a base radio station though, and that was about the only thing that disappointed me about St. Denis.

"They don't need one", said Bruce on the line one day. "Christ! We get about eleventeen stations from Montreal as it is."

Too bad. I really enjoyed playing disk jockey for a day once a week. Some people even said I was pretty good. Maybe there's a civvy station somewhere down there that needs a part-timer, who knows, I said to Bruce.

"Parlez-vous Francez?" said Bruce.

1 did my last shift on Radio M.A.R.S. while a new guy just in from Radar School in Clinton watched me, getting checked out. I let him spin some records while I went upstairs for a leak and to get a Coke in the snack bar.

I ordered my drink and stood waiting beside a woman who was sitting on a stool.

"Hello, John."

"Hi," I said. I looked down. It was Charlie.

"Oh Hi!" I said. I guess I jumped a little.

Thin-faced, bags under her red eyes, no make-up, she looked like hell. I must have showed it.

"God do I look that bad?" she said smiling.

"No, no you look great, Charlie," I lied. "How are you doin'?"

"I'm okay I guess."

"I heard you were sick for awhile. I was talking to Lee and Ken...."

"I'm fine!" she interrupted looking quickly into her coffee cup. "It was nothing," she said waving a thin hand as if to brush it away. "I'm fine." "I heard you got transferred to Senneterre."

"Yeah. How's that for a stroke of luck, eh?" She shrugged. "Oh well. It'll be nice to get the hell out of here, I'll tell you that," she said.

"And you. Going to St. Denis. I hear you've got company, too."

She looked up at me briefly and then away again.

I guess my excitement at being transferred with Hanky-Panky Barber showed. There was a dangerous silence, but it passed.

"I've only a couple of weeks left," she said, looking up at me. Her eyes behind those black-framed glasses looked dispirited, almost doleful. Pained.

I thought about the rookie downstairs.

"Look Charlie. I'm just doing my last radio show and checking this new guy out. Do you want to uh...talk...maybe come down for awhile?"

She looked into her coffee, sighed deeply. "Yes, John."

She pushed the cup back and stood. " Yes, I do."

We walked in just as the late Buddy was coming to the end of "Raining in My Heart" and the rook reluctantly got up and I slipped in behind the mike. I read the weather forecast and a bit on the recent opening of the St. Lawrence Seaway that I clipped from the news service. While I was reading it, the kid moved around in front of me and showed me "Somewhere, Across the Sea " by Bobby Darin and I nodded and he cued it up: "Here's one for Ike and 01' Uncle Louie from all the new foreign sailors now walking around in Fort William and Port Arthur." I hit the turntable switch.

"Smoother than Vaseline on an ivory toilet seat!" I said and I shook his hand. He laughed.

I looked over at Charlie sitting on the couch and she was smiling that great smile. Now THAT was nice to see. I bopped on for awhile. It was a little sad really, saying goodbye to the great unseen vast listening audience of Radio M.A.R.S. after a year of cuein' them up.

After signoff, someone over in married quarters called to say they'd miss me, and what the hell was I doing in the air force anyway, when I could be makin' a million at WPTR?

"Who the hell wants to live in Albany? I'm goin' to R.C.A.F. STATION PA-RA-DISE!"

I hung up and said, "These people have been up here far too long. I couldn't sweep up at a real radio station."

"Oh, I think you could if you really wanted to, John," said Charlie.

The rookie was making noises like he wanted to go, so I told him I'd file my stuff and lock up and leave the key at the firehall.

The door shut and there was an awkward silence. I filed forty-fives and L.P.'s and hung the news back up on the wall. Finally I took a deep breath and said, "I meant it when I said it's good to see you again, Charlie. It's been a long time."

"I know it has," she said, staring at the rug. "But we had that argument, and I didn't think you wanted to be friends anymore." She looked up at me. "It's good to talk to you, John."

I grabbed a chair and sat facing her.

"So what's been happening, Charlie?"

"You know what's been happening. Everyone on the base knows probably except me. I want you to tell me about him John. Like you wanted to do the last time we were here. Only this time I'll listen, and I won't cry. I'm cried out."

"Tell you about Barber?" I was suddenly getting cold feet.

"Don't play dumb with me, John. Please?" Then,

softening, "I just want you to be a friend, okay? Please?" I thought, should I tell her everything? Do I have to, or will just part of it be enough to get her to drop him like a bad habit?

"Tell me everything, John," she said reading my mind.

"I don't know if I want to be the one to..." I began.

"Just tell me."

"Are you still ... uh ... going out with .... "

"Hank? He hasn't talked to much me since...he doesn't say two words to me when we're at work. He took off somewhere on days off and I think he was with Lilly Casey."

"Does she work in accounts?"

"Yes, she does. So it's true?"

Here goes nothing. "Yeah, it's probably true. I don't know about going away on days off with her, but yeah. It's true."

Her eyes filled up.

"I'm sorry. I know I promised. Shit." She fumbled around in her black leather purse for a Kleenex and blew her nose. "That son... of... a... bitch.," she said very slowly. "That bastard. You have no idea what..."

"I think I do Charlie," I said.

"No, you don't. You never will."

"Maybe not. I do know he's treated you badly and after what happened to you at home, you didn't need that."

She took a minute and composed herself.

"What did he say about me? Remember you said he talked about me."

"You don't want to hear that, Charlie. It's just filthy." "Tell me."

"I don't want to, Charlie, I ... " She came up off that

chair like it had been set on fire.

"TELL ME! GODDAMMIT! TELL ME RIGHT NOW! TELL ME!" She was standing, furious and scary, wailing down at me. Her face was red and the whites of her eyes were enormous. Her hands were balled into fists in front of her.

"Charlie, I can't."

I got up and put my hands on hers. They were like ice. She sat down again, sobbing, her face in her hands.

I looked at her. What the-hell did she ever do to deserve all this? Time to put the final nail in that bastard's coffin, I thought. I'm just sorry it has to hurt her.

"I won't tell you that, Charlie," I said. Her streaming eyes looked up at me. She shook. Be careful, I thought. She was next door to a complete emotional collapse. "But I'll tell you what's important," I added quickly.

I took a deep breath. Here goes.

"He's married. He's got a kid. In Gander."

She recoiled, her hand over her mouth, a sickly look on her face. Her eyes were wide with shock and abhorrence. She just sat, staring at me.

Finally: "Ohh. God. I should have known. Married. I'm so stupid. He is a pig. He was always a pig, wasn't he?" And then she cried for a long time, shuddering, deep crying, from the soul.

It was over. That will end it. She's been through enough. Looking back, it turns out I was only partly right.

I held Charlie and she hugged me almost in half and cried some more on my shoulder. We walked a sad walk back to the barracks under another beautiful, starry sky. She dabbed at her eyes with a Kleenex for awhile, but then just stopped crying and sighed very deeply two or three times.

We stopped for a minute and stared up at the night sky.

"Remember that night before Christmas, John? Under the... Aurora Borealis?".

I nodded.

"See, I remembered what it's called."

I looked at her, and a brief smile showed through her heartache for just an instant.

"Do you feel a little better now?" I asked.

"Sort of." She looked away for a few seconds.

"Yes, I guess I do. I'm sorry I went... acted that way, John. I didn't mean..."

"I understand, Charlie."

"You do, don't you?" She looked at me in a curious

way.

We stopped under the light in front of the barracks. " I feel like a piano is being lifted off me," she said. "God. What a bastard."

"Are you going to be okay, Charlie?"

"I'll get over it."

She hugged me. "Thanks for being a good friend, John. I'll make it up to you somehow."

She turned and walked into the barracks.

## Right

I had almost finished my clearances, trudging from section to section on the base, getting signed out, turning my parka back into Supply, and finally clearing the Rec centre which claimed I'd signed out a badminton racquet and had never brought it back. I finally found it in my kitbag along with two beer empties and a copy of "Weatherways" I should have studied for the trade board. I just had to clear Operations up the hill, get my paperwork to Admin, and I was a goner.

I was due to get the run to Quebec City in a couple of days to catch the Montreal train. I'd put in for five days leave in Sherbrooke before signing in at Lac St. Denis.

They threw a going away party for me in the club, and the Crew Chief came over and presented me with a plaque of the squadron crest and everyone signed. It was a hell of a party, at least what I can remember. Andy, Frog and Vic all came down. Frankie and Mouse and Gladys too. We sang and danced and shot the shit and laughed and talked over our stories of the past year.

Charlie came down on her way to work and hugged me and thanked me and swore she'd stay in touch. She looked a little better, I remember. She had some colour back in that pretty face that first fascinated me twelve months ago, and her eyes were beautiful again behind the glasses. I was fairly drunk and I kissed her and made some suggestions. I can remember her laughing as she walked away.

She waved and blew a kiss at me. I thought, hey, it's the old Charlie.

I finally flamed out in a chair and someone poured me into the pit back at barracks. I slept until noon, got up and showered and into the battle-dress to finish the clearances. The bright spring sunlight hurt my aching head as I headed to the mess for some lunch.

I caught a mail run up the hill about two o'clock and asked the driver if he'd wait while I ran in and got Wilmot to sign me out, but he said he couldn't. He was due for a run to town in a half an hour.

"No sweat," I said. "I'll hang around and catch another run down."

Wilmot signed me out and I was headed out the door when he said, "You better hustle your ass down the hill, Hunter. They're supposed to call an alert any time now."

I was about six feet down the hall from the CopsO's office when the P.A. blared. "Attention. We are at a state of simulated DEFCON 2 at this time. All personnel report to your section head."

Wait a minute! Surely to Jesus this doesn't include me? I'm cleared of this place. I'm signed out. "Sure as hell does include you, signed out 'er not," said the Sergeant Crew chief when I asked. "Where do you work? Intercept Control ? Get up there." I couldn't believe it.

"Look, I gotta catch a run to Quebec tomorrow morning, Sarge."

"No shit. Yer breakin' my heart. It'll probably be over by then. But fer now get it up to Intercept Control."

I reported and a bunch of us I.C.A.'s sat around for about forty-five minutes. Everyone had a great chuckle over my good luck.

Soon a busfull of FighterCops arrived and about an hour later the exercise started in earnest, with groups of bogeys in twos and threes penetrating the Mid-Canada

Line headed for us. They scrambled a load of fighters out of Bagtown.

For die first three hours or so, I was stuck with this Brit officer who couldn't control his way out of a paper bag. If he didn't screw up his angle-off or LOP he'd blow the call signs. We ended up after the first wave of bogeys with three missed intercepts. When the fighters were R.T.B.'d, he threw down his headphones, pitched his Dalton Computer on top of the scope, looked at me like I was stuck to the bottom of his shoe, and told me to get them back to base. Then he walked out.

Another pilot not adjusting well to the radar business.

I really care much at this stage. I was out of here and he wasn't.

Somebody came in to relieve me at the height of the exercise when F/L Fubar and I were between fighter assignments. I gladly left and started to walk down the hallway to the staircase that led up to the roof, hoping to catch some air up there. It was hotter than hell in Intercept Control, with ten hot bodies crowded around five warm radar monitors. Also, just being terminally pissed off makes me warm.

I stopped for a drink at the fountain outside in the hall. As I bent over the water fountain I thought I heard a kind of sobbing noise at the end of the next hallway, around the corner from me.

I heard a door being opened; it's door-closer making a soft swish.

I straightened up and walked the six feet or so and turned the corner into the back hallway. Ahead of me, at the end of the hall, the stairway door was still closing. No sign of anyone. Big deal, I thought. Someone coughed, or something.

I shrugged it off and walked down the hall toward the still closing door. To its left was the firedoor that led to

the stairs to the roof. I went through it and walked up the dark stairs and pushed open the door on the roof.

The sky was ablaze with the setting sun. The sun's top half, still visible above a cloud bank, cast a huge painted splash of oranges and reds across the sky.

There was a cool breeze and it felt wonderful through my clammy blue nylon shirt. I loosened my tie and took off my uniform jacket and slung it over my arm. I walked over toward the edge of the roof, fascinated by the wondrous sunset. The search radome hiding the multi-ton revolving dish above me emitted a low rumble and cast a long shadow on the roof. I looked out on the thousands of acres of northern forest, some of it in the distance shimmering in the golden red and yellow, reflecting a sunset I've never been able to forget.

I smiled at the memories this roof gave me.

I looked behind me, down at the edge of the base townsite nestled in the valley, tiny lights twinkling in the gathering twilight. I've made some good friends, I thought. I've had some good times here.

I grabbed a handful of roof gravel and tossed it down the cliff for the last time. I heard it clatter on the rock face, far below.

Something over on the edge of the roof flickered at me, mirroring the sun's last glowing rays.

At first I thought it was a Coke bottle somebody had left. Usually they were flung with great delight into the canyon, everyone counting the seconds until the tiny faraway crash was heard way down the side of the mountain, but this seemed to be a smaller, rounded sort of gleam reflecting at me.

I took a few steps toward it, squinting in the half-light. Now two reflections gleamed at me.

"What the hell is that?" I said out loud.

I walked toward the twin beams, my footsteps

crunching on the tarry roof-gravel. I can hear it now, that sound, and I can still see those reflections <u>shining</u>.

I stared down at a pair of women's glasses. I picked them up. One arm of the black frames was slightly bent at the hinge where they attached to the lens-frame. One lens was scratched. They look like Charlie's I thought. Maybe she dropped them and someone stepped on them. Could be her spare set that fell out of her purse. She'd be hard pressed to work I.D. without her specs. I put the glasses in the inside pocket of my uniform jacket, sat down and lit up a smoke, staring out at the stars starting to glimmer faintly above the fiery skies.

A meteorite streaked through the sky. I made a wish. After a few minutes it got a little cool, so I got up, put on my jacket and crossed the roof to the firedoor. I pulled it open and went down the dark stairs to the hallway door. A shadow momentarily broke the single line of light that crept under the door, then was gone. As I walked out into the hall the stairway door was slowly closing again.

About eleven o'clock they reduced the DEFCON and a couple of buses came to lug us all down the hill. Everyone except the evening shift on duty piled into the vehicles.

Someone yelled, "Is everyone here? Raise yer hand if yer not!" That produced a big laugh and the bus driver booted it down the hill. We hit the Airmen's Club again.

I couldn't hack it much past one o'clock, so I went back to the barracks, finished packing my gear and hit the pit.

My run to Quebec was leaving at ten o'clock the next morning.

I cleared Admin and took a healthy travel-allowance advance from accounts the next morning and Frog, Andy and Vic joined me for breakfast in the mess hall. They stayed reasonably sober the previous night, so for once we

were able to really chow down on breakfast. I was starving and decided I better take on some extra groceries anyway. Food wasn't cheap on the train. Two over with bacon, homefries, toast and a side of pancakes with juice and coffee should do it. Then I scammed a sticky bun or two on the way out.

My duffle bag and brand new flight bag were back in the barracks, so we strolled out of the mess hall, headed for the room.

I grabbed my stuff and they walked me to the Motor Equipment Section to catch the run to town.

We shook hands all around and promised the promises and I got in the van. Quebec City next stop.

I looked over my shoulder at the three shining white globes standing sentinel up on Mont Apica as they receded in the distance. Hardly seems like a year, I thought.

I was halfway to Montreal on the bus before I felt something in my uniform pocket and realized I still had Charlie's broken glasses. Or somebodies. When I got home I put them on my dresser meaning to mail them back.

I spent some time with the folks and drank beer with my old buds, having conversations with long silences. We would end up twenty-five years down the road marvelling at how skinny we were in those black and white pictures in the yearbook, beaming in our striped jackets for the class photo, or kneeling behind a basketball that had "Seniors-1958" chalked on it. Where did we all go?

I couldn't wait to get to Lac St. Denis. Nestled in the Laurentians, it was everything it was advertised to be. My two and a half years there would change my life, starting with the first two and a half hours.

I arrived on a Friday evening and Bruce was waiting for me in the club, pushing a beer into my hand, introducing me around.

He had been doing a bit of advance work for me. He'd managed to save me a bed in his room, even scrounged some sheets and a blanket for me and had put a word in with the powers-that-be to get me on his crew. He took me around for a tour, and we ended up standing on the shore beside the lake, looking across the water.

A little breeze came up, rippling the glassy surface of Lac St. Denis, swaying the tall trees on the mountain on the other side.

"God this is a beautiful base, man," I said.

"Sure beats ol' Mont A-Puka," he said, chuckling a little.

"They'll be towin' that thing out pretty soon, when it warms up a bit." He pointed to a wooden raft on the shore.

"It's a great beach. God, we even got our own motorboat! I'm puttin' in for lifeguard. They give you two months temporary duty down the Goddam hill! If I get that I'll think I'll have died and gone to heaven."

I started to say something about this place being close to heaven but he jumped in.

"Jesus that reminds me! I guess it must be nice not to have to worry about your ol' buddy Barber anymore, eh?"

"What about him?" I asked. "They cancel his transfer here? I hope?"

Bruce turned and looked at me with surprise.

"You don't know? Jesus I guess not, eh? You were on leave."

"I don't know what?"

"Holy shit!"

"What?"

"Barber. He fell offa the friggin' Mont Apica ops building roof! That's what happened to him! Durin' some exercise. Can you believe it? Silly bastard. Three hundred feet down. Splat!"

I didn't hold on to what I heard.

"Fell? What exercise? What?"

"About a week ago." He figured for a second, looking at the ground. " Yeah! A week ago yesterday, cause I got stuck up the hill. I was workin' day shift. Piss me off."

A week ago. Something very frightening started to come together in my mind. I felt my hands get cold. I looked at him. I hope he's puttin' me on, I thought. If he is, it's a good one.

"You're., c'mon man! You're kiddin' me." I managed a grin.

"Come on, Bruce. Jesus!"

"I'm not kiddin' ya, John !"

"Okay, so what happened then?"

"Whatya think happened, dummy? He bought the farm! He's flatter than pee on a platter fer Chrissakes!"

My guts did a little flip-flop. He held up a boy scout salute.

" I swear, okay? For the last friggin' time I'm not friggin' kiddin ya, John! Barber went offa the tower roof! Down the steep side, where we used to go for breaks and throw rocks and stuff? I kid you not." I'm sure my mouth flopped open. I stood there, stunned.

"They never found him for, I dunno, three days 'er somethin'? He was way, way the hell down at the bottom in those trees, fer Chrissake."

I finally managed to swing my shocked expression from Bruce to the black lake. Barber is dead? Fell? He picked up a rock and skipped it on the water. I watched the ripples spread across the surface. I could feel Bruce looking at me. I glanced back at him. He punched me lightly on the shoulder.

" Hey, Christ, relax man. It couldn't have happened to a nicer guy, right? Cheer up." He thumped me again.

"You look like yer best friend died!"

He chuckled. "Jesus, there was one time you'da killed himyourself, right? Relax. He was a dork."

I remembered. I made a halfass attempt to be calm. "Well, me and about sixty-five other people wanted to. Good Christ! How about that! Barber fell...off the..."

My God. "Roof. Yeah. Frog told me on the line the meatheads interviewed everyone that was up the hill for that exercise. That was after they finally found the poor bastard down in the woods. They went through that tower with a fine-tooth comb before they found him, Frog told me."

He searched the ground for another rock. I reached up and squeezed my jacket. Empty pocket. You left them at home on the dresser.

"Found him last Sunday, for Chrissakes." He held his nose.

He found a flat stone and skimmed it at the water.

"Hey! At least eight skips! Not bad!" He started to laugh.

"Y'know, I was talkin' to Stretch up in Moisie. On the line. I says hey Stretch guess what they saw in the woods from up on the roof. He says, another CF, an eagle, a friggin' deer? I says, no. A dead corporal! Ha! Sick eh?"

I tried to laugh. It was pretty feeble. "So what did they ... "

"Aw, he just laughed, said, hey bozo, see any ducks late.."

"No, no, I mean what did the meatheads find out by talking to everybody?" Get to it, Bruce, Goddamit! "Well, I guess, nobody even seen him up on the roof, never mind fall off." He winged a rock at the beached raft, missing by two feet.

"Well, I ain't no Whitey Ford, that's for sure ... "

Then: "Hey, I'm surprised they didn't call you or get you back offa leave. They're just liable to pull that kinda shit, y'know."

I'm surprised too, buddy. I felt my face get warm. I fished my cigarettes out of my shirt.

"Yeah, I guess they ..."

"But, hey, that's right," he continued, bouncing one off the raft. "All right! You must have been cleared by then, eh? So you were gone." A light went on. Right.

"Well, I was uh..." No, not gone, Bruce. Just forgotten. I hope.

"...I was cleared off base before the exercise, yeah."

Tell me no stories I'll tell you no lies.

"Jeez you missed all the fun, then, eh? Frog said after Barber's roommates reported him, like real gone, ha ha, the dumb meatheads finally figured out the last time anyone seen him was up the hill. Nobody seen him comin' down on the bus. So, like I said, they started lookin' around up there..."

If yer not here raise your hand. Bruce picked up another rock and threw. I gotta find out now.

"Did they figure out how he.. .how the hell he fell off the roof?"

"Who knows? Tripped 'er somethin'. Got too close to the edge, y'know. Takin' a break, probably in the dark, and ..." He did one of those fireworks bomb sounds and arced a pointed finger towards the ground..."boom!"

"Are they sure he just slipped and fell over? I mean, a heart attack or something..."

"Unless somebody shoved him, he probably just stumbled, that's what they're sayin'."

"Who'd... shove him?'

"Christ you said it before. Everybody wanted to. Nobody probably. But the meatheads say it's still under

investigation, though. Give the lazy buggers somethin' to do, anyways."

He fired a rock as hard as he could way out and waited for the splash. He rubbed his shoulder.

"Ow. I hope I didn't throw it out." He swung his arm in circles.

"Frog said they'll probably even get some Command meatheads up there, C.I.D. guys, snoopin' around, lookin' for the Mont Apica rooftop murderer for Chrissakes. But then again they do that if someone buys it in a car accident, right? Stupid jerk Barber failin' off the roof! Crazy man crazy."

I hope we'll never know how much, buddy. I thumbed my zippo and lit my Players cork-tip. My hand shook.

"What are ya, nervous in the service?" he said, smiling at me.

I took a deep drag, settling down a little.

"Who isn't? Actually I'm freezin' my butt." And I

was.

"That's a cool breeze off the lake."

"Well, it's probably still beer call, so let's go have a few and be somebody," Bruce said.

How is she? I thought. Bruce must have heard me.

"Oh yeah," said Bruce. "Frog says they talked to that broad that Barber...uh...what was her..."

"Charlie?" I said, a little loudly, stopping. "Charlie Graham?"

He stopped ahead of me, looking over his shoulder.

"That's the one. Oh yeah. You and her were buddies, right? C'mon, lets walk."

I started walking.

"They talked to her, Frog told me. I guess her an' ol' Hank just broke up, or somethin', right?"

I nodded. Here it comes.

"Frog says a Med A told him the meatheads talked to her for a long time, up the base hospital".

I almost didn't ask, afraid of bad news.

"Is... she, uh, okay?" Look out.

"Oh, she was in bad shape, Frog says. She was in there for a couple days. Kinda nervous breakdown, er somethin', he said. Well no wonder, eh? Her and Barber went out. Musta been a shock, eh?"

He left it there. I waited as long as I could.

"And then what?"

"Whattya mean 'and then what'?"

"Jesus Bruce! I mean what happened to Charlie after the hospital? Do they think..."

"Don't get yer ass in a knot! They sent her home on sick leave until she goes to...wherever she's transferred to, I dunno. Frog told me, I forget." Be strong.

"Senneterre," I said as we walked up the road. "She's going to Senneterre."

"God, what a crappy transfer outa Mont Apica", said Bruce. We walked up toward the club.

"I think she's looking forward to it," I said.

Ahead of us, beyond the tallest mountain around Lac St. Denis, the sun was setting the sky on fire behind the three shadowy radomes.

"Helluva sunset," Bruce said.

## **Epilogue**

Canadian Forces Station Holberg, British Columbia August 1967

The rain fell in a steady drizzle as we slashed through the undergrowth of the Quatsino rain forest. The trail was cleared about every five weeks or so by base Search and Rescue crews, not for any military reason, but to keep it open down to San Josef Bay for hikers, and the two hermits who lived on the trail. We had been down here just three weeks ago, so the going wasn't that bad. A mist clung to the ancient, towering, centuries-old Sitka spruce allowing precious little of the grey light through.

We'd already passed the cabins of hermits Cordy and Lincoln, two old curmudgeons on the run from something or somebody. They lived about two miles apart on the trail and never spoke to each other. They were friendly enough to other visitors, though. Cordy had even invited us in to drink tea in his book-lined cabin again today. We had to turn him down. We were in a hurry.

The trail wound through the forest past the old original Danish settlement of Holberg; four acres of cleared land now hidden behind yards of tangled forest growth. You would walk right by it if you didn't know it was there. To cut your way through the growth brought you suddenly into a strange and ghostly deserted farming community. Farms are rare on mountainous Northern Vancouver Island. But the Danes had come fifty or more years before, full of promises from the Canadian government if only they would settle here.

Settle they did, clearing the gigantic trees out by hand and dragging cast iron wood stoves and everything else they couldn't harvest from the rain forest, up the trail from the Holberg Inlet. They had been promised a dock; a proper dock that would anchor the supply ships that sailed up from Vancouver and Victoria. Like most promises from the government, it never happened, and they went back to Denmark, leaving their community and its contents, but not their heartbreak, behind.

Mouldy reading primers were stacked in the schoolhouse, and pans hung in the kitchens, next to kerosene lanterns. In the barn, rusting plows and harrows stood in corners beneath rotting leather bridles and harnesses. In an upstairs room in one of the houses were letters from Denmark. A calendar hung on the wall. "PORT HARDY LUMBER" it said. The month showing was September, 1909.

The Base Standing Routine Orders were pretty specific about removal of anything from the settlement. If they caught you, you were as good as gone.

Dick Ormesby and I tried to sleep in one of the cabins there one night while hiking down to the beach. We talked bravely and drank rye and smoked and tried not to break into a run when we heard the noises from the bam and schoolhouse.

Just before dawn we were dozing off when the unholy shriek of a cougar had us sitting up in our sleeping bags waiting for a Viking apparition to slam through the door and slice and dice us for our government's transgressions.

There was some thought about boiling a kettle for tea, but we decided that could wait and got the hell out of there at a brisk pace.

Danish ghosts in the tiny graveyard, perhaps, wanted to go home too.

Ormesby was just ahead of me again this time as we sloshed down the muddy trail, whacking at the occasional tendril of growth.

Before we were told to go on this little trip I was feeling pretty good. It was just that morning the Orderly Room had called me in the barracks with the good news.

"John? You lucky stiff! It's Howie, Orderly Room. You got a house, married quarters! Not an apartment, a Goddam house right next to Bo's!" I couldn't believe my good luck. "Flight Lieutenant Murphy is in it now, but he's leavin' and you can arrange transportation for the dependents to get out around the end of the month."

I hollered with joy and then phoned my wife and our fiveyear-old daughter to tell them the good news. We'd been waiting eight months for married quarters. She had been staying with her mother at the new apartment.

We had managed a week-long leave together since my transfer here, but that was all.

We were married in 1961, on a warm June day, in the Base Chapel at Lac St. Denis, surrounded by friends and family. Bruce was my best man. He said he'd never seen two happier people.

When I called her with the news, she was excited. We would have been happy in a place in one of the three apartment blocks, but the houses were nicer, with fireplaces and carports and completely furnished too, right down to the dishes.

Howie had mentioned that our place was close to Bo's house; a legendary Warrant Officer and the only captain of the only *BOAT* in any Airforce in the free world. R.C. A.F. Motor Vessel Nimpkish, the mighty little seventy-two-foot former World War II minesweeper that swept Tokyo Bay before the Armistice signing in '45. Now it shipped in people and goods from Coal Harbour. The logging companies owned the road and allowed other

use only in the evening and early morning hours.

I was a happy corporal, for more than one reason.

While working a shift as a replacement bartender in the Officer's Mess a couple of night previous, the C.O. had asked me if I would take over as General Manager of CFHG, the base radio station. He mentioned there might be some temporary duty for me in Vancouver, to talk to some CBC people who wanted us as a kind of base station when they completed the up-island.relay towers project. I nodded wisely and mumbled something about the taxpayers up here finally getting their money's worth. Inside, the prospect of meeting with CBC civilians in suits scared the living shit out of this lowly airman, but I was on a roll, no doubt about it.

We continued our march down the twisty trail. Trudging at the front of our soggy line was Sergeant Squirt MacDonnell who worked on crew one in the Data Maintenance Control Centre. The FighterCops had been computerized for six years now, sending pictures of our scope faces every few seconds to NORAD Division headquarters, where they were digested and spit out at guys who sat at System Information Displays reading Digital Information Displays and zapping computer generated blips with light-guns. Long gone were plotting boards, radar report rooms and tote boards, except for back- up.

Also part of air force history were the airwomen FighterCops. They were all given the opportunity in '62 to change trades or get out, along with about a tenth of the male strength who were mostly new recruits. They were missed. The government, in its determination not to screw up a perfect record of continuous screw-ups, had done it again. Airwomen Fighter Control Operators were conscientious and reliable, sometimes more so than their male counterparts. In spite of excessive discrimination,

they were trustworthy and made fewer mistakes; far less than our bonehead political leaders in Ottawa, who now seemed hell-bent on spoiling the military as a whole. They had "unified" the armed forces.

It was the beginning of the end for three of the world's most unique and respected armed forces, the Canadian Army, the Royal Canadian Navy, and the Royal Canadian Air Force. But the ladies were gone and with them, a lot of our spirit.

Nowadays, in the radar biz, we (now called Air Defence Technicians) had a tiny plotting-board back-up system in case of computer failure, but it wasn't the same. Because of so much computer down-time lately a special crew was formed to go up the hill and revert to the old system until the computer version was restored. I, along with four or five other guys, became team members. They called us the Tiger Team.

When the computer was working, or they couldn't scare up some exercise to keep us in shape, we'd slack off. I was either in the Corporals' Club or the radio station most of the time.

I was at the club and into my second beer when we got the call. Six of us from Ops who were also Search and Rescue volunteers were to meet in the C.O.'s office. We trudged down to Admin through a steady drizzle and filed into his office. After thanking us for volunteering, and some talk about what an excellent job of trail-clearing we had done, he turned serious. We were reminded by the Old Man that all of us were cleared to Secret. We then signed forms pledging that whatever we saw and heard on this "exercise" was not to be discussed with any unauthorized personnel, including family members and especially the press, unless directed to do so. Those orders came from Ottawa.

Keep your mouth shut. The general public has no

need to know. We don't need an "incident", and the Goddamn press will blow it all out of proportion. Then he told us what it was all about. Now we crossed the San Josef River again, tippy-toeing carefully across moss covered logs that had been laid across the swollen stream at a narrow point. We took a break for a minute or two, had a smoke and gazed at the huge Steelhead salmon lying in the deep corners. We used to joke that compared to Vancouver, it took us the same amount of time, but considerably less money, to get a salmon in Holberg. There was no joking now. Everyone was quiet.

We were sweaty just thinking about what was ahead. Squirt stood up from a map that had been spread on the trail.

"Okay, you guys, listen up. We're about fifteen minutes from the beach. We should be there by six o'clock at the outside. There is no reason to expect the silly buggers to do anything but if they should try, get your ass out of there. There's no Jesus way I want to use this." He patted the nine-millimetre pistol in the canvas holster on his belt. "I'm a lover, not a fighter. The deal is just like the ol' man said. We're baby sittin' the bastards until high tide. That's gonna be about 2100 hours. And don't worry about not makin' any noise. We want them to know somebody's coming. Everyone roger that?"

He spoke into the two-way radio. "Base, search one. We are approx fifteen minutes from the beach. Repeat-fifteen away from beach, over." He waited. Static.

"Stupid jeezly things never worked at the best of times. He stood up. "Let's go, guys."

We marched rather quickly now down the last mile or so of the twelve-mile trail that led to San Josef bay, south of Cape Scott.

We could hear the distant roar of the breakers as they swept in on the two-mile crescent of smooth sand ahead.

Sometimes you could find those pretty green and blue glass balls; Japanese fishing net floats that washed up, or perhaps a beer bottle or two from Australia or Hawaii. Somebody on base had found a bottle with a note in it, and had written to the people who had thrown it off the side of a cruise ship two years before. All kinds of things washed up on the beach in San Josef Bay. Even Russians.

From up the hill in the summer months the Russian "fishing trawlers" could be seen just outside the twelve-mile limit. Their huge masts jutting out at angles from their deck were in fact antennae and they gleefully listened to all our air/ground/air transmissions to the fighters out of Comox, a base down island from us.

These comrades waiting to greet us had decided to sneak in for a closer look at Kanada, and stuck their boat on a sandbar one hundred yards off shore during low tide. Somebody on break, playing with his brand new binoculars on the ops building roof up the hill had spotted the boat. They'd noticed nobody was home. Why, if these Bolshevik boneheads could see the radomes inland, they would come ashore here of all places, we couldn't figure. Maybe the thing had a duff engine and they just floated in.

We were walking up the final small ridge, the roar of the surf now quite loud. When we came to the top, there they would be, I thought. The Reds. The Bogeys. The Hostiles. They would be crouched and waiting with sub-machine guns for this scraggly group of scope-dopes armed with one pistol that probably hadn't been shot in years and two machetes that might clear weeds if you swung hard enough. Russians. My knees started to shake. Eight years I had been squinting at a scope in the dark waiting for the Russians to show up as little green blips. I never wanted to actually SEE them in person, really.

"Keep yer heads, you guys. This ain't no friggin' exercise," hollered Squirt at the top of his voice.

We were all breathing fast. It was not the exertion.

This was the ENEMY we're meeting now, I thought, psyching myself. These Russian bastards are the reason we do what we do! All those midnight shifts staring sleepily at the scope waiting for the huge Bear bombers with their friggin' nuclear bombs! Then we'd direct our gallant fighter pilots to within scant yards of the invading Commie pigs so that the Reds could fall in flames to the frozen tundra! Before they could bomb the shit out of our cities, our wives and our babies! They built the Berlin wall! They put missiles in Cuba! They probably shot Kennedy! AND HERE THEY ARE, THE GODLESS COMMIE EVIL SONS OF BITCHES! We

can\*;

into the clear and looked down. There below us, were six naked men, swimming in the ocean. They were laughing and jumping around and splashing each other. These are Godless Commie evil sons of bitches? We stood on the hill looking at each other. Somebody started to laugh. Squirt told him to cut it out, this was serious shit.

One guy, obviously a slave to the pool rules at the "Y" back in Vladivlostok, ran up on shore and had a carefree leak with his hands on his hips.

There was a pile of clothes down on the sand. Oh oh, I could almost see the semi-automatics underneath, ready to be grabbed and fired and blow us into little Kanadian chunkskis all over the forest.

"Don't stop you guys! Just keep walking! They'll catch on to us soon! " Squirt shouted over his shoulder as we trudged down through the sand, deafening the next two guys behind him.

There was a small rowboat pulled up on the beach. Just visible above the outcropping of land that pointed to Japan on the north end of the beach, the masts of their grounded trawler could be seen poking up at an angle.

Comrade Wizz heard Squirt and looked toward us

while making his puddle.

He started yelling and waving his arms toward the others as he ran back into the surf, peeing as he ran. They looked at him and giggled and then at us and with silly grins, stood where they were in the knee-deep water and raised their arms. One guy held a bottle.

One of them yelled, "Halloo! Halloo!"

"Stay there!" said Squirt, holding up a hand like a traffic cop. "Stay! Stay!"

"Sit!" said Ormesby. "Drown!"

We started to giggle, nervously. They giggled back.

"Jesus," someone said. "They ain't Reds. They're pinks!"

We chuckled. They chuckled.

The water was cold, obviously.

"If my dick was that short, I'd be pissed off at the world all the time, too," I said.

We laughed. They laughed.

"Settle down you guys," yelled Squirt. " One of you go over and see if anything's under that pile of duds over there."

The Russians started to walk in, talking loudly and laughing and hallooing at us.

Squirt put his hand on his holster.

"STAY RIGHT THE HELL WHERE YOU ARE!" he shouted.

They giggled and stopped and made pleading gestures and hugged themselves to show they were cold. They all wore beards, I noticed.

I walked over and kicked the clothes around and felt them for suspicious lumps. I came up with a couple of watches, a half a loaf of stale bread, a chunk of cheese and a knife. It was one of those Norwegian long skinny types with the wooden handle that are good for filleting fish. Also, four bottles of vodka in a canvas bag. Two

empties were stuck in the sand.

"There's bread, cheese and four bottles of booze, Sarge. And a knife."

"Hold onto the knife, Hunter," he said.

"CAN ANYONE SPEAK ENGLISH?" he shouted at the shivering pasty-white Russians. "ENGLISH!"

One guy waved his hand. "SMALL SPIK ME! ENGLISH ME SPIK! SMALL!" He pointed at his furry chest. He was built like a bowling ball with feet.

"YOU COME HERE!" said Squirt, pointing and motioning to him.

Small Spik started waddling ashore and the rest followed.

"NO! YOU! JUST YOU!" hollered Squirt.

Small Spik stopped suddenly and the rest collided behind him, laughing with arms still raised like some bad hombres in a nudist western. One of them tripped and fell in.

"DA! ENGLISH SPIK!" he yelled back.

"JUST YOU COME IN!" Squirt tried again, pointing at Small Spik and waving him in with one hand and giving the stopsign with the other for the rest to stay put. That seemed to work for most of them. One guy started to follow Small Spik but he took three steps and one of the comrades grabbed him from behind and ducked him, laughing like hell.

These guys are really taking this seriously, I thought.

The guy with the bottle took a swig and passed it on. All of Small Spik was shivering, sort of oscillating. This was a chubby commie. If you told him when he was dressed that his shoes needed shining, he'd have to take your word for it.

As he walked toward us, Squirt spoke into the radio purely for effect. He held the radio upside down and it was off.

Our dreaded enemy stood before us naked except for a watch. I thought, well, on second thought, if we had to meet the Russians, this really is the way I'd prefer. He pointed to the clothes.

"Pliss," he said, searching for spik, "aaaah...g-givink aaah...veee...aaah...coats? Pliss?"

Squirt, ignoring this plea, took a piece of paper from his pocket. He read it, clearing his throat first and blea<u>ting</u> like a town crier in spite of the fact the man was three feet in front of him. "YOU ARE ILLEGALLY ON CANADIAN SOIL! MY ORDERS ARE TO ASK YOU TO LEAVE PEACEFULLY AS SOON AS POSSIBLE! WE ARE FROM ROYAL CANADIAN AIRFORCE STATION HOLBERG!"

Small Spik, perhaps not understanding this order from the sheer volume at which it was spoken, repeated his request.

"P...Pliss. Kanada. Aaa..givink coats us?"

Squirt read it again, thankfully in a lower tone: "You are illegally on Canadian soil. My orders are to ask you to leave peacefully as soon as possible. We are from Royal Canadian Air Force Base Holberg."

"Ober?"

"Holberg. We are Canadian Air Force," said Squirt pointing to a shoulder patch. No joy. Small Spik, now shaking like bowlful of Jello, smiled and pointed. "Coats? Pliss?"

"Somebody get him a pair of pants and a shirt."

One of the guys grabbed a shirt and a pair of pants and tossed them to him.

Small Spik struggled into somebody else's small clothes. The shirt couldn't be buttoned and he managed to get the zipper on the pants up halfway.

"Kanada", he said, smiling and laughing, gesturing around us. "Ha! Kanada!"

"You must go!" said Squirt, pointing out to sea.

"We feesh," he said, grinning, doing a great rod and reel fishing pantomime.

"Bullshit!" said Squirt.

He grinned at Squirt. "Bool?"

"Shit." said Squirt, angrily. "You are full of SHIT!.. You are monitoring..."

"Sheet? Nyet SHEET!" He groped. "SHEEP! DA! SHEEP! SHEEP!" He waved at the boat beyond the point, beaming.

"I think he's saying ship," I said. "The good ship bullshit." Ormesby laughed. The Russian laughed.

The evil enemy laboured on, grinning at us and groping for the other six English words in his vocabulary, pointing and putting a fist into his palm. "Sheep... ahhh.. .sheep...."

"Stuck?" I said, pointing at the sand.

"Da! Shtook! Sheep Shtook! So vee...." He made swimming motions. I'm winning charades in Russian, I thought.

"Vee..." with this he turned to look back at the grinning comrades. "Vee..aaaah..."

"Swim?" I ventured. Sounds like dim.

"Sveem! Da! To Kanada! On ahhhh... bitch!" he said, and laughed, proud at remembering "beach". Or maybe he meant bitch, just expressing how he felt about the situation.

"You can't stay here. You must leave. You must GO!" said Squirt, pointing majestically at the horizon with great authority.

"Da. Go. We go. Aaaah..." He was pointing at the water.

"Sea." I said. No joy. He grinned at us.

"Water." someone said. Nope. Grin.

"Ocean?" asked Squirt.

"Dal- Paseefeek oseen! Up oseen! Paceefeek oseen UP...WE GO! HA HA! OSEEN UP! WE GO! HA!" He pointed west, enthusiastically.

"Okay." said Squirt. "1 think he's got it".

"HOKAY!" said Small Spik.

"Lookit you guys, form a big semi-circle behind the pile of clothes."

Squirt waved-in the shivering Russians out of the water.

"OKAY! OKAY! COME! COME!"

They all came in arms still raised, lips blue, giggling and nodding at us with chattering teeth. They dressed hurriedly. Three or four fell over in the sand, whooping and laughing, trying to get a leg into their pants. They were pissed. It was like a group of kids getting into their snowsuits after a birthday party. When they finally finished dressing we got them to sit in a circle. They did, with the brown bag in the middle. We stood behind them, our backs to the rain forest.

"Who is the Captain?" said Squirt. "Cap-ten?"

"Kapitan? Me Kapitan!" said Small Spik.

"Da! Da! Kapitan!" chorused the rest, pointing at Small Spik and laughing. Obviously, they held him in great respect.

"You Kapitan?" said Kapitan pointing at Squirt.

"Yes.- I'm a Sergeant. Da." Squirt, with his first tiny venture into Russian, glanced at us with a half grin. "Sar...jent."

"Seer Jant?"

"Sar..jent." said Squirt indicating the three hooks on his arm. "Seer jant."

"Seerjant!" said Ormesby, pointing at Squirt. "Da! Seerjant!"

The Russians thought this was hilarious.

"Ormesby, settle down you bonehead." said Squirt.

We sat down on the sand after a while. We looked like two groups of foreign tourists that happened to meet on a beach somewhere. Our guests chatted amiably among themselves, not really concerned about their illegal trespassing at all. They acted as if they'd been caught crashing a party and would leave when the cab came. Kapitan spoke. "Paceefeek Oseen Up?" He pointed at his watch, and looked at Squirt, his bushy eyebrows raised. Squirt held up nine fingers. Kapitan relayed this to his fellow crewmen.

The last rays of the setting sun peeked through the clouds and sparkled on the ocean. We sat and stared at each other and the scenery for a while, small talk on both sides.

"GOORDIE HOO!" shouted one of the Russians suddenly, with excitement. "KANADA HOKEY! GOORDIE HOO!" We smiled and said in chorus, "Howe. Da. Gordie Howe."

"HOWE! DA! GORDIE!" said Kapitan Small Spik.

"You hokey Kanada?" He pointed at us, individually.

"You? You? You?"

Some of us nodded. He pointed at Squirt." Sure. Da. I play hockey."

"Seer jant hokey!"

They all bellowed: "SEER JANT HOKEY!" Squirt smiled.

"Seer jant crummy hokey!" said Ormesby.

"Russia hockey Da!" the Kapitan said then. "Russia Kanada hockey! Da!"

Having found something in common with his hosts, Kapitan decided to toast the occasion.

He reached down, retrieved a bottle of vodka out of the knapsack, unscrewed the cap and, grinning, pitched

the cap into the ocean. Squirt started to say something, but stopped. .

The round Russian held the clear bottle up and said, "Trel Smogeaters Kanada hokey! Da!" and took a swig. He held it out to Squirt.

"Seer jant?"

Squirt shook his head. "No thanks. The Trail Smokeaters aren't my team."

One of the Soviet sailors stood.

"Seerjant. All Kanada with Russians here...comrades now," he said sweeping his arm towards us. "Kanada nice."

"Good God this guy speaks the language!" I said." Where was he when we needed him?" He was primed for a speech.

" Ve not comink to war. Ve come to only sveem. Ven vater ummmm. .tall, ve go bek boat. Pliss. You hef wodka to Canada. Also Russia, no? We ummm..." He looked around at his shipmates.

"WE OKAY! FIVE SQUARE! ROGER?" The Komrads had a big laugh.

Amazing how much English you can learn listening to operational frequencies.

"Five square. I'll be a son of a bitch." said Squirt, lighting up a Players.

He took a deep drag, snapped the Zippo shut and looked up to see all Russian eyes on his cigarette.

"Guess what they'd like, Squirt?" I said, chuckling.

"Jesus", said Squirt, shaking his head and looking down at his fresh pack.

He looked up at the expectant faces of our guests. They had the expressions of kids looking at a chocolate cake.

Squirt held out the pack. "You guys wanna smoke?"

"Does G.I. Joe have plastic balls?" I asked.

In short order Squirt was short six cigarettes and was happily busy flicking the wheel on the Zippo, cupping the flame with his hand against the breeze as the Russians stood up and came over to us and leaned in for a light.

I thought perhaps Squirt was getting a tad incautious.

"Hey, Squirt I wouldn't..uh..." I started.

It had occurred to me that if the black belts in the bunch had been discussing in Russian what the best timing for the punch out would be, this was it.

"Nervous in the service, John? No sweat." said the suddenly trusting Seer jant. "They're a buncha pussy cats, right fellas?"

"Poozy ka?" said two or three, and laughed, puffing away.

Hands across the Iron Curtain, I thought. This must be like that famous Christmas Day during WWI when the enemies emerged to shake hands and sing carols, and went back to shooting each other's asses off hours later.

But everyone lit up politely and without incident.

Dick reached over and grabbed one of Squirt's smokes. I did the same.

"Tank you, Seerjant!" said Ormesby, loudly, bowing from the waist.

The Russians all echoed: "Tank you Seerjant!"

Squirt smiled. "Your Velcome!"

We all laughed like hell. East-West tensions had relaxed, like they say on the six o'clock news, at least on a beach on northern Vancouver Island. The sun went down like a red rubber ball. Just fell into the water. Kerplunk.

As the tide rolled in, we talked to the captain in small spik, and to the more comprehensible sailor. We talked about hockey (we had a hell of a time with "Mebble Iffs". We finally got it when one of them mentioned Mahovlich), and about the weather, and everyone's

hometown.

They passed the bottle among themselves, occasionally holding it up to Squirt who shook his head no each time, much to their seemingly genuine

disappointment.

Some of them had been on ships that had sailed down the St. Lawrence Seaway and down through the Great Lakes and knew "Kveebec, Velland Canal, Fart Veeyam, Part Artur, Soo."

A couple of our guys were from one or the other of the places mentioned and talked, with great animation, about their hometowns. "Where in Russia are you from?" I asked, slowly. Twice.

Different places, it turned out. Only two of them from the same place; Kiev.

They had been at sea for five months, they said. All were married. All had children.

One guy said something and held his arms as if to cradle a baby.

"Hees vife geev babby two veeks ago," said the sailor.

He raised the bottle and toasted the new father in Russian.

They all roared the toast and started to sing. The new father had tears in his eyes. These people are no different than we are, I thought.

More cigarettes were lit, and they opened a new bottle.

"Hey, Clutch. Didn't your wife have a kid recently?" said Ormesby to one of our fellow beach liberators.

"Roger-Dodger! Gettin' so's I can't keep track no more", said Clutch Cloutier, Bo's first mate on the Nimpkish and father of six.

"Roger-Dodger!" said the U.S.S.R. swim team in chorus.

At that second outburst of the familiar phrase used by both fighter pilots and controllers, the Captain hollered something and they all stopped smiling immediately and looked at their feet, some of them giggling.

"They got the chatter down pretty good," said Squirt. He looked at Kapitan Smallspik.

"Feesh rodger-dodger, Kapitan?" asked Squirt, making fishing rod and reel motions. The Kapitan glared at his crew.

After a ten second pause his glare changed to a smile and then they all started to laugh so hard they were flopping down and rolling around in the sand. They toasted the most recent Clutchette and sang some more and passed the bottle to Clutch. He looked at Squirt briefly for approval or disapproval. He got neither and took a pull from the Stolichnaya bottle anyway, gasping as he passed it along.

Little splinter groups formed as Squirt and I talked to the Captain and the guy that knew some English. The other guys communicated in sign language, pointing and gesturing in a kind of spoken game of charades. An hour or so passed.

In the twilight there was cautious chugging from the vodka bottles. Squirt sat on a driftwood log and began earnest conversation with the Kapitan. A bottle sat between them, stuck in the sand. Some Canadian R.C.A.F. shoulder patches were torn off and handed over as souvenirs.

We have met the enemy, and he is not playing the part, I thought. This is more like an International Scout Jamboree.

A noisy game of beach hockey broke out in the fading light, with a glass float for a puck and driftwood hockey sticks.

Eventually, the hockey sticks were used to start a fire

that soon crackled and hissed at the circle of faces that stared into its glow. As we sat around the fire, a Russian started to sing and the rest joined in, some of us joining in and humming the last chorus or two. It was a beautiful familiar melody, much slower than The Tijuana Brass had done it, Midnight in Moscow.

Somebody else started "The North Atlantic Squadron", and we taught them the chorus, and filled in with the cabin boy - the dirty little nipper - and all those other immortal verses.

They sang "...lookink for veemen peddlink bum in nort atlintic skvadron, HEY!"

I sat next to the English-major. We spoke haltingly of our homes and our wives and kids. His wife's name was Anna, he said.

I told him mine was named Charlene; but everyone called her Charlie.

He was about my age. He told me he had a brother who flew in the Russian Air Force. I told him of my brother who flew for Canada. He asked me if I could give him a souvenir. I gave him a Canadian one-dollar bill. His name was Georgi. Yorgi, he pronounced it.

The tide had come in and waves were washing close to our circle around the fire.

Squirt clapped me on the back. "Hey John, lookit. I want you to walk around the beach and up on the point. See if their boat is free offa the sandbar. Here's my flashlight." "Okay, Sarge, " I said.

I stood up and my new Russian friend stood with me. He said something to the Kapitan who just shrugged and went back to his eager conversation with Squirt, pointing a finger into Squirt's chest, laughing, well into the vodka. I didn't feel any pain myself.

"I go vit you, John." Georgi said, pulling on my sleeve. Vee go."

"Hey Squirt!" I hollered over the singing that had started. "Okay if he goes?"

Squirt looked up for a second and impatiently waved me away.

We walked north around the crescent of beach toward the peninsula of rock and sand that jutted out into the ocean a hundred yards or so. Waves swept against its rocky point and the moonlight seemed to make them phosphorescent when they foamed on the rocks and then retreated.

It wasn't a long walk. A fairly stiff cool wind blew in on us as we walked.

"Canada summer like Russia. Bring cold at night," he said, rubbing his arms as he walked.

I pulled out my pack of weeds and we stopped to light one at the base of the rocky point. He offered me the bottle of vodka. We climbed the twenty feet up through the sandy scrub brush and then walked out to the point. A couple of lonesome pine trees clung tenaciously to the mossy sandy soil, leaning out towards the sea.

"Is it hot in Russia in the summer?" I asked. "Y'know. Hot?" I said, wiping my brow.

"Da! Same as Canada! Like Canada." he said.

We stood silently for a few moments looking out at the trawler.

He said something in Russian.

The trawler was free, bobbing in the moonlight.

"What did you say, Georgi"?

"My home... Russia. Here I feel also home! Russia like Canada but....not same," he said. He swiveled his hand back and forth.

"Same...not same."

I looked at him and he had a wry smile. "Soon vee go beck," he shrugged. "Home is good."

We both stood for a while, side by side, staring out at

the dark Pacific. He must have shared my thoughts. Those we love far away cold-war widows and fatherless children. Leaders who were enemies leading people who were not. Enemies looking at each other and seeing themselves. Green peaceful pastures always out of reach. Why?

I turned to go. I looked up at the two thirty-foot pine trees that stood close together just behind us, the wind hushing through their needles at the waves that tumbled on the rocks below us. The tree-tops leaned back in the ocean's breeze.

I thought of trees long ago. A jackpine. A poplar. A tree that filled a man with dread and hope. A tree that made a small boy's soul rejoice and fly.

"Hey Yorgi, wanna climb a tree?" I asked, pointing at the pines, smiling at him. Both of us were weaving a little in the wodka and the wind.

"Hokay John! Da!" he said, clapping his hands like a small boy, "Up trees!"

It took me a little longer than him to shimmy up but soon we were up to the slender tops as far we dared, standing on small branches, hugging the tops as they bowed back in the breeze.

The wind ruffled our shirts and hair as we faced the moonshimmered ocean, the branches whistling next to our heads in the wind.

"AHAAAA! IS BEAUTIFOOL!" he yelled over the surf and wind. "BEAUTIFOOL!"

"IT IS VERY BEAUTIFUL!" I said.

it.

"DA! WERY BEAUTIFOOL!" he said.

He stretched his hand toward me. I reached over and shook

We hung there for a few minutes, released and exhilarated, and silently watched the moonbeams that rested on the glittering choppy ocean. They shone from out beyond the trawler, out beyond the twelve-mile limit

where there were no borders.

As we swayed in the gusty breeze I went back to Albany and got off my bike and once again looked up at the tall poplar and began to climb.

After a while he shouted. "I JUST NOW TINK OF DIS! MY BROTTER IN AIR FORCE ONCE SAY BEAUTIFOOL POM... FOR MOTTER AND ME."

We clung to the tree-tops, the wind rushing against our faces, our clothes ruffling like flags, the waves dashing below us.

"I FEEL NOW, LIKE DEES POM SAY, JOHN."

Pom? I thought. Poem?

"DID YOU SAY PO-EM?" I shouted back.

Never dreaming.

"DA! YOU KNOW DEES PO-EM, JOHN?" He put one hand out into the windy moonlight, out to the dark starry sky. Oh God. I do, friend. I have been there, long ago and danced the skies on laughter-silvered wings.

I nodded. The wind took a tear from my face. He looked away from me and up, reaching into the sanctity.

"FEEL LIKE", he said, laughing gently, "I TOUCH FACE OF GOD."

The end

# "A Canadian M\*A\*S\*H . . . well worth the time."

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Peter Garland served in the R.C.A.F. as a Fighter Control Operator on the Pinetree Line for twelve years, from 1958 to 1970. He is presently a broadcaster in London, Ontario. This is his first novel.



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